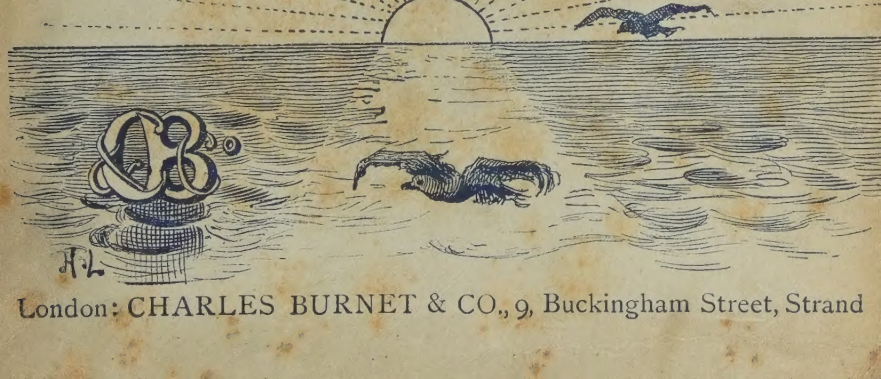
PRICE ONE SHILLING

My First Offer

By

Basil Blackett.



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MY FIRST OFFER

BY

BASIL BLACKETT.

LONDON:
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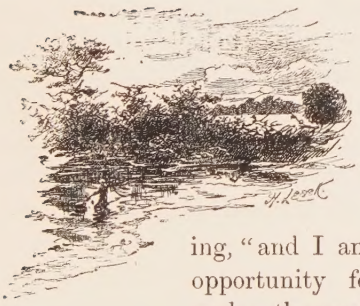
1889.

MY FIRST OFFER.

CHAPTER I.

The music in my heart I bore
Long after it was heard no more.'
—*Wordsworth.*



"AND so I am to go?"

"Certainly," replied my mother, putting down the letter which she had been reading, "and I am very glad of the opportunity for you to have such a thorough change."

The letter contained an invitation for me from my great-aunt Mary to spend a month or six weeks with her in her southern home.

I was a Manchester High School girl, nineteen years old, and had just finished my education, and was intending to make my debût during the

ensuing winter, in the circle that we visited in the northern capital. My mother was the widow of a Manchester doctor, who had died rather suddenly, leaving her with limited means and four children, of whom I was the eldest. We lived in Greenheys, in a pretty though not large house. Mother was a southern woman. All her friends and relatives lived there, and many were the tears and vain regrets she had wasted in her early married life, for the home and associations of her youth. The great-aunt from whom I had just received the invitation, was a maiden lady of good fortune, living in the lovely county of Surrey. I had not seen her since I was four years old, when I had gone with my parents on a visit to my southern relatives. At that time I have every reason to believe I was one of the most odious of *enfants terribles*, and certainly did not find much favour in the eyes of my great-aunt. Since that time only occasional letters had passed between us, and our surprise was great when we received the invitation. The letter was worded as follows:—

The Woodlands, Burnham Park, near Oakford,
September 4th, 18—.

My Dear Fanny,—Many thanks for the kind messages sent me by you through Mrs. Milbanke. She tells me Alice has grown a nice companionable girl, and has left the schoolroom. If you think you would like to spare her on a visit to me for a month or six weeks, I shall be glad to welcome her; and as the Wyntons are at the Hall, can

promise her plenty of amusement, such as tennis, impromptu dances, and other gaieties. If you will spare her next week, and let me know the day and hour at which she will arrive at Oakford Railway Station, I will send the pony carriage to meet her. Hoping to hear good accounts of yourself and chicks,—Believe me to remain, your affectionate aunt,

MARY LASCELLES.

These were the contents of the letter which seemed to afford mother so much pleasure. I did not feel sure whether I was quite so content. Really I felt secretly annoyed Mrs. Milbanke had not said something more flattering about me. "Nice and companionable!" She heard I was that? Why, the same might be said of Lucy, our old sewing-maid, who had lived with us for years. In my very brief experience of life, I had always noticed when anybody was exceedingly ordinary, their friends always called them "nice." Since we had got up the theatricals at the High School, during the past winter, when I took the part of "Rosalind," it had been whispered to me I was not without my share of good looks, and I was getting rather fond of looking at myself in the glass whenever opportunity occurred. My two brothers being as complimentary on these points as schoolboys generally are gave rather a damper to my aspirations; my sister was too young to see any beauty in anything but a chocolate box; and, mother—oh, she was so obtuse! If I assumed a most becoming pose, she would immediately

begin to tell me that my hair was very untidily arranged!

"What must I wear?" I asked, fidgetting with some of the flowers in a vase near me.

"Wear?" replied my mother, with an expression of astonishment at the question, "something simple; you are not going to Court, and a girl's chief adornment is simplicity."

"Of manner, mother! Does it go as far as dress? I do like to be a little in the fashion. Lucy will let me have only one steel in my dress, and Teddie says I am a regular guy."

"What does it matter what boys say? Leave matters to me. I will see you are properly fitted out."

Mother's promises reassured me. They were generally to be depended on, if she was not over-ruled by Lucy, who was, like all old servants, a great tyrant, and obstinate to a degree.

"Do tell me all about great-aunt Mary, and who are the Wyntons? Now, mother, see, here is Jane with afternoon tea—a capital opportunity for you to give me a nice long description of everything and everybody I shall see at Burnham."

"Really, Alice, you overtax my powers. I could not tell you about everybody; but you shall hear all I know. Pour me out a cup of tea; not so strong,—gently, child," as I put in the sugar with a hand regardless of gout. "There, that will do. Now come and sit here;" and I sat down on a

Patience stool near her. She stroked my curly hair, and commenced by saying, "Alice, shall I say, 'Once upon a time,' like old nurse with the fairy tales?"

I laughed. "Go on, mother; just as you like."

"Well, Aunt Mary is, as you may have heard, an only child, and something of an heiress, having a fortune of £20,000. She never married, greatly because she would not leave her parents, and after their death she had arrived at that time of life in which she felt her habits and modes of thought were too formed to wish to change her state; besides, she was perfectly independent. Why should she not please herself? Her great friends, Sir Charles and Lady Wynton, who lived at Burnham Hall, hearing she was seeking a new home, were very anxious she should take a house called 'Woodlands' in their park, and, of course, on their estate. It had originally been built for a Dower house, but had never been used for that purpose; and, as Lady Wynton declared she would never live in it, should the unfortunate necessity arise, it seemed the very place for Aunt Mary, their greatest friend, to occupy, and be so near them—for Woodlands is only about two miles from the mansion. It was not too large; would not be very expensive to keep up, and three or four servants would be sufficient. The market town of Oakford is only a mile and a half from the lodge gates. All arrangements were settled, and Aunt Mary

became their tenant ten years ago. Since that time both her friends, Sir Charles and Lady Wynton, have died, and been succeeded by their son. He married one of the county beauties shortly after his father's death, and after a brief married life she died very suddenly two years ago. He was fearfully cut up, shut up the mansion, and has been travelling abroad until very recently; but you see, Aunt Mary says in her letter he is now at the Hall for the partridge shooting. His sister-in-law, Mrs. Robert Wynton, is taking the head of his table whilst the guests are there, as there are several ladies with their husbands staying in the house. Altogether, I expect you will have a charming visit, and see some of the best society."

I twisted mother's fingers in mine. It all sounded very well, but it seemed too grand. One did not hear much about estates, baronetcies, etc., in Manchester.

"Were Sir Charles and his wife so very happy?" I enquired, feeling I wanted to hear still more.

Mother looked grave; she thought a moment or two before replying, then said, "Alice, I believe there was some misunderstanding between them, but you could neither follow nor enter into the causes and effects of it, so dismiss it from your mind. Perhaps I ought not to have mentioned it, but I do not suppose you will see much of him. With a large number of fashionable

visitors, a little school-girl like you will scarcely be observed."

"Little!" I exclaimed, for I was considered rather tall. Mother was again trying to bring down my self-esteem, but I repressed my annoyance, in order to pursue my subject. "What sort of a place is the town of Oakford?" I asked, pouring out another cup of tea.

"Oakford?—a very nice clean little place. There is a fine church there, with a square tower and a grand peal of bells. The rector (Canon Wilkins) and his wife are very old friends of your aunt. There are delightful church services, and good singing. Of course there is the usual country-town society—lawyer, doctor, and so on, but I do not know anything about any of them. Aunt Mary chiefly visits the county people, and is a great authority amongst them in her way."

"She is clever, then?" I asked.

"Oh! very clever indeed, a woman of remarkable acumen and powers of discrimination."

"Mother!" I exclaimed, jumping up from my seat and clapping my hands, "I shall be annihilated. What with baronets, estates, dower houses, Canons of the Church, etc., and a very clever woman for an aunt, you will see and hear no more of me."

We both laughed.

"Go, silly child," she replied, "we will write and accept the invitation by this evening's post;

and the first thing to-morrow morning will pay a visit to Kendal and Milne's, to get you the necessary finery."

The next week was indeed one of active preparation. Our sewing-maid, Lucy, whirred the machine from morning till night, and consulted fashion books; the designs of the patterns, however, were always altered to her standard of what was suitable for young girls. As I stood by her one afternoon, watching her deft fingers guide a long seam, the thought occurred to me that I would strike the iron whilst it was hot, and petition for a matrass pad, and an additional steel for my best dress.

Never shall I forget her stony stare of astonishment when I made known my request.

She jerked her thread off viciously, and tossing her head, replied in a voice of stinging scorn:

"Pad? why much good it has done you going to that dress exhibition, if that is what you want! Eh! my word. Pad, indeed," and she almost foamed. "Why, didn't you hear the lady that gave the lecture say how very unhealthy they were, that they heated the spine, and brought on all sorts of internal complaints. Steels add to the weight of dresses dreadfully, and the lady said you must be very strong to bear the weight of about 28 lbs. in your dress alone. Eh! my word, your ma might as well give dummies the advantages of a liberal education as you children.

Young ladies now are pretty objects, with their tight lacing and heaped-up tournures. Fainting as they do in church, too! I've no patience with 'em. If the doctors was to cut their stay laces instead of giving 'em that there syrup of the Hypoppolises as a tonic, they'd be right enough."

"Well, Lucy, I don't agree with you; I like the fashions, little waists and everything."

She glared at me, and absolutely snorted, saying

"The lady at the exhibition, that lectured, said that people who did so were barbarians; no matrass pad or top steels I put in for you, miss," and she sent the machine off at score.

My brother Robert looked up from a book he was reading near the window, and, with a broad grin on his boyish merry face, said:

"Lucy is of a classical turn, and admires the Venus of Milo. Her waist would not be under 28 inches—no local doctor required to cut her stay laces," and he roared with laughter.

Lucy glowered at him; she neither understood nor liked "chaff." "Master Robert," she replied, with an air of injured innocence, "don't talk of none of them wicked heathen goddishes here!" I laughed; there was evidently no convincing her, as she was as obstinate as all ignorant people are, so I occupied myself with other preparations. We were all busy; every little thing I did or did not want was carefully packed in my travelling basket, and, after many affectionate farewells from the

dear ones at home, I arrived at Oakford railway station one bright September afternoon. It had been a very hot day, and I had found the journey long and tedious. Alighting on the platform, I looked around for the little page boy who I had been told was to meet me with the pony carriage. A chubby-faced lad, in a neat livery, seeing me looking about, came up, and, touching his hat, said, "Miss White, I believe?" On my assenting, he continued, "The pony carriage is waitin' outside, miss, and the luggage is to go on the light cart." Turning to the porter, who had extricated all my belongings from the luggage van, and instructing him to follow me, I went through to where the little carriage was waiting. All arrangements having been satisfactorily made, I soon found myself being driven along at a spinning pace. We passed through the town, clean, well paved, and thriving, then along a good turnpike road, with cottages scattered here and there, till we arrived at some high iron gates. A pretty little gothic cottage, the lodge, was to the right of one of them. Pots of very bright scarlet geraniums were in the window, and the little plot of garden in front was a blaze of flowers. A little girl with dark eyes came out to open the gates, dropping me a curtsey as she did so. We drove through a long avenue of fine trees, the bright afternoon sun was glinting through them, and throwing such lovely shadows; then we turned down a road to the left, and came more into

the centre of the park. The ground was undulating; fine trees, clumped and massed together were scattered at intervals, and small groups of deer stood peacefully browsing under them. The air seemed so light, the sky was so blue, diversified by the most beautiful fleecy, feathery clouds. My spirits rose rapidly, although I felt a little nervous at going amongst comparative strangers. We descended a hill, and I saw in the distance the chimneys of a long, low, brick house, embosomed in a mass of trees.

"Is that Woodlands?" I inquired of my young driver, who was carefully holding up the pony's head.

"Yes, miss, that is it," he laconically replied.

Whisking off some flies with the tip of his whip, then gently urging on the too-willing pony, who knew his stable was near, we trotted away till we came to an open gate, into a small carriage drive, the beds at the side of which were well planted with shrubs and flowers, till we stopped before the hall door of Woodlands. My great-aunt was on the door step to welcome me, and kissed me most affectionately. She was tall and slender, with a great deal of natural dignity. Her hair was of that silvery whiteness which is both so lovely and becoming, and was neatly arranged under a cap of Honiton lace. Her face was oval and features well cut, not so much lined considering her years, for she was over sixty. Her

dress was of black silk, well cut and fashioned, and a white shetland shawl enveloped her shoulders. Her eyes, certainly the most striking part of her face, were of a soft grey, which changed in shadow to a more intense colour; they had a *distrait* far-off look about them which was most peculiar. She led me into the house. The hall was large, not quite square, with walls panelled in carved oak; chairs, and a table of the same, comprised the furniture, with handsome rugs thrown over the polished oaken floor; several pots of palms were distributed about. A wide staircase, with fine balustrades of carved oak, was at the left side of the hall, and on the table was a blue and white china bowl filled with Marshal Niel roses. Even now, I can smell the delicious perfume from them. Let me lay down my pen for a brief retrospect. . . . Yes, the soft summer air of that afternoon passes over my face again; the smell of the roses, the gleams of the western sun streaming through the open front door; the stately figure of my great-aunt and her silvery hair forming a fine foreground to my picture. My own bright youthful hopes, coursing with the strong sanguine pulses of nineteen, all are before me for a brief moment. My heart swells. And what is this that dims my sight?

* * * * *

To the right of the hall door was the drawing-room; it ran the whole length of that side of the

house. There were two large long French windows, one at each end, the one looking on to the carriage drive, the other to the lawn and shrubberies at the back. It was furnished in an æsthetic fashion, but perhaps looked rather sombre. The dining-room and library were on the opposite side, and before coming to the handsome oak staircase, there was a red baize door studded with brass nails, which led into the kitchen and offices.

After drinking a cup of afternoon tea, Aunt Mary took me upstairs to my bedroom, where a smart looking housemaid was unstrapping my travelling basket, and placing out some things from my hand bag, she asked me if she could render any further assistance, but not being accustomed to anything of the kind, I politely thanked her and refused, whereupon she left me. I had now an opportunity to observe all my surroundings. The room was at the back of the house, over the drawing-room, with a large window looking on to the lawn and distant park; the view was lovely. The walls were papered with a light paper of a geometrical pattern, and embellished with a few good engravings. The bed was an old fashioned four poster, with heavy dark moreen hangings; a writing table, small sofa, and an easy chair or two, gave an air of comfort and snugness. As we were to dine at seven, I changed my dress for a simple costume of cream nun's veiling; and taking a small cluster of scarlet geraniums out of the vase on my

dressing-table, pinned them at my neck, in order to lend colour to my rather severe costume. My hair was short and curly, of a ruddy gold colour; my complexion rather pale, and my eyes grey, in some lights blue. When I had completed my toilette to my satisfaction, I went down to the drawing-room. Dinner was served punctually, everything perfectly appointed, glass and silver spotless; the page was the only servant waiting, but he seemed to anticipate one's wants, and moved about with a deftness of purpose which was simply marvellous to me, after my experience of our northern housemaid, with her heavy thumping tread, loud stertorous breathing, and noisy clatter. The room was dark, owing to the walls being of oak. Two lamps, with amber paper shades, gave the only light. The flowers on the table were beautifully arranged; all spoke of elegance, refinement, and quiet. Here I felt I had left the busy turmoil and noise of a great city, and was in perfectly different surroundings. Aunt Mary chatted briskly during dinner, telling me all the local news; the beauties of Burnham Hall, the seat of Sir Charles Wynton; the grandeur of the gardens, the number of visitors there for the shooting, were all descanted on in their turn. I mentioned the late Lady Wynton, but as I did so I noticed that a deep shadow passed over her face, and she did not gratify my curiosity more than politeness compelled. She went on to speak of Oakford Church, of its delightful curates, Mr. Peel

and Mr. Ashton, who both came in for a share of good-natured criticism. Canon Wilkins she was sure I should like; he was a powerful and impressive preacher, etc., etc.

As I was eating a pear at dessert, she gazed intently at me for some time, then said in a bantering tone, "And so you are a Manchester High School Girl?"

"I was, but I left school last term for good."

She smiled. "Learned in all the 'ologies?"

"Oh, yes!" I replied, laughing. "Bioplasm and protoplasm, Latin and Greek—Uncle James says I have been educated to death."

"Can there be such a thing, Alice, in these days? Still education cannot be of such very great importance to you."

"Why, Aunt Mary?"

"Cannot you guess?" she replied, looking to me with a meaning smile.

"Oh! I suppose because I am not to be a governess."

"Well, not exactly; but you must know you are good-looking; men like pretty fools——"

I blushed furiously. There was something after all in what Ella Smith said to me after the first rehearsal of the theatricals at school.

Dinner over, we retired to the drawing-room. It was a hot night, and a gentle breeze came in through the open window which led into the garden. Aunt Mary took her knitting, whilst I

reclined in a comfortable easy chair, resting from the fatigues of the day. After a time she asked for a little music, and I played one or two sonatas. The piano was good—a grand of Erard's, and stood near the window; it was very rich and full in tone, and I anticipated great pleasure in having it to play on whenever I liked during my visit. At last my aunt, looking at the little Swiss clock on the mantelpiece, said, "Past ten! What time do you usually retire, Alice?"

"About this time, or when mother goes," I replied, turning over the leaves of some music; "but I'm in no hurry. I am not so very tired."

"I think you must be, my dear; you have had a long journey, and there is a tennis party at the Rectory to-morrow, to which we are invited. You know where to find your room. If you want anything, if you ring Emma will come."

I saw she wished to retire, so said good night.

Really Aunt Mary was charming, of that there could be no doubt. Fascinating? Well, fascinating also. Her will seemed irresistible, yet she was not in the least aggressive or egotistical.

Taking a silver candlestick off the hall table, I slowly wended my way up the broad oaken stairs, which were covered with a very thick soft carpet. All was still. No one seemed about, no sounds were heard from the kitchen regions, owing to the thick red baize door, which shut off all communication. An old-fashioned clock stood in a

little recess halfway up the stairs; it ticked very loudly, and as I stood looking over the balustrade at the palms and flowers in the hall below, seemed to say to me in rhythmical tones, "Don't go—don't go—do not go, go, go." It was aggravating, and I laughed at my ridiculous fancy, and its pertinacity. Arrived at my room, I looked all around to see that there was nothing or no one concealed, a school-girlish idea of a probable burglar under the bed still remained an article of faith with me—no one of course was there. In a short time I was in bed and fast asleep.

* * * * *

Something seemed gradually to awaken me. I sat up and listened. Music it was; of that there could be no doubt; soft, gentle plaintive strains; one of the most beautiful of Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words." Striking a light, I looked at my watch. Half past one! Some one was at the piano in the drawing-room, for it was from thence the sound emanated. I got up, and, wrapping a shawl around me, softly opened the window and looked out. It was a bright moonlight night, the rays casting a silvery sheen on the rustling leaves of the adjacent trees. A heavy dew was falling, and the air seemed laden with delicious country scents. No one was to be seen on the lawn, or near the shrubberies.

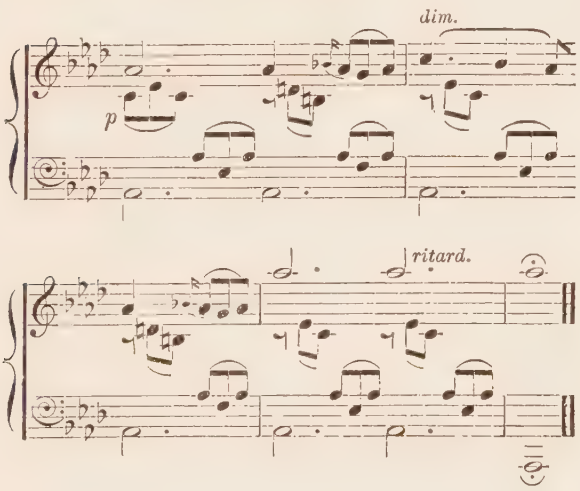
Surely Aunt Mary could not be playing Mendelssohn at this hour? Besides, she had years since given up her music.

The materialist reader will say, "Oh, the piano had been left open, and it was a cat running over the keys." But I was something of a musician, having had all the advantages that musical Manchester affords, and could tell that these sounds proceeded from a musician alone. "A burglar, then," argues my materialist, who will have a definite reason for everything. Well, if so, he must greatly have mistaken his vocation.

I felt certain the drawing-room window was open, from the sound, but could see no reflection of any kind from an interior light.

What should I do? I withdrew from the window, and, as is my wont when agitated, commenced pacing the room.

Should I go and arouse Aunt Mary? And face waiting at her door alone on the landing whilst she answered my knock? Call the servants? I did not know where they slept. My strong-minded readers will say, why not have gone down to the drawing-room, and seen for yourself who it was? Well, I was only nineteen, in a strange house, and the shadows of the nursery bogey tales were not yet effaced by time from my imagination—I trembled with a vague indefinable fear—I was afraid of—I knew not what—I was convinced it was neither Aunt Mary, nor burglars; it must be

some other visitant, supernatural or otherwise, playing Mendelssohn in a dark room, with windows opening to the ground, at such an hour. The only plan I could conceive was to remain quiet; the morning would prove what it was; as I should, of course, make every inquiry. Extinguishing the candle, I lay down to try to sleep again. The sounds seemed to die away, gently, softly; the notes were as follows, in very slow time :—

The last bars seemed to reverberate on my brain—then a silence ensued. I was becoming more composed, the fascination of the beautifully executed music stealing over my senses, when I heard some one, or something, in my room. Strange! I

was sure that I had taken particular care to search every corner on coming to bed. It must be some fancy. It was not sufficiently light to distinguish the outline of any form, as the venetian blinds were well closed the reverse way, to prevent light entering.

The Presence approached *me;* I dared not move. My heart beat quickly; a cold wave passed over my brain, and I became unconscious!

* * * *

CHAPTER II.

"Maidens, like moths, are ever caught by glare,
And Mammon wins his way where Seraphs might despair."
—*Childe Harold.*

When I awoke to consciousness the sun was streaming into my room. It was morning then? What could the terrible experiences of the past night have been? The birds were carolling loudly, and all nature seemed rejoicing. Past terrors assumed a trifling aspect, as is so often the case when daylight, and especially sunshine, revives the nervous system. I determined to rise, dress, and make it my first object to discover the cause, or causes, of my disturbed night. As soon as I was ready I went down to the dining room. John, the page boy, was putting some knives on the breakfast table, and the housemaid giving the furniture some finishing touches with a duster. Going to the point at once I said, "Emma, I had

a very disturbed night. Somebody was playing the piano in the drawing-room between one and two, and I am sure I heard some one in my room quite close to my bed. What could it have been ?"

She coloured, and exchanging glances with John, became very busy over polishing up a knob of the chair ; then, looking up, said, "Oh ! Miss, it must have been fancy."

"Nothing of the kind," I quickly replied. "I never fancy things. Is there any one else in the house but my aunt ?"

"Any one else, miss ? Nobody but the servants; and I'm sure they wouldn't touch the pianner at that time of night."

"Some one *was* in my room ; I heard breathing."

They both exchanged a quick, meaning glance. Emma was the first to answer—

"Oh ! miss, it must have been fancy."

Really, the audacity of these servants was too much ; to think I did not see their telegraphic communications, and then to assure me what I had stated was simply fancy. I took up a book and sat down to read; it was no use to think I should elicit any information from them. At nine o'clock breakfast was served, and John informed me that as my aunt seldom came down early, I was not to wait for her. I felt disappointed. My mind was bent on a quick solution—logical, illogical, or otherwise—of this mystery, and I should have to school myself to suspense. I was natu-

rally anxious to hear her solution and view of the matter. When I had nearly finished breakfast, a gentle tap came at the door. On my saying "Come in," Sylvester, my aunt's confidential maid appeared. She was the very embodiment of respectability and primness; about fifty years of age. Her black hair, which was well sprinkled with grey, was arranged in old-fashioned sausage curls each side of her face, kept in their place by side combs; a white cap, trimmed with black and white satin ribbon, black dress, and linen collar and cuffs completed her costume. Her eyes were black and beady, with cunning in their twinkle; complexion sallow; features of a strongly plebeian type. Plausible and deferential in manner to a degree, she was eminently adapted to retain a strong hold over those who came under her influence, should it be worth her while to do so. I instantly distrusted her—nay, even recoiled from her as one would from a serpent. After clearing her throat, she commenced to explain the object of her visit by saying, "I beg your pardon, Miss, but Emma happened to tell me you had complained of not having slept well, and of having been disturbed by sounds of music. Therefore, your aunt wished me to come and see how you were?"

I turned round in my chair to face her and replied, "I was immensely disturbed. Some one in the drawing-room was playing the piano; and

I am also sure I heard some one or something in my room between one and two."

She absolutely started, but quickly recovered her composure, and after pretending to be very interested in watching a bird on a tree by the window, so as to give herself time to consider what she should say, replied, "Oh! Miss White, it must have been fancy. No one would be likely to be playing at such an hour. I fear you are not well."

"Perfectly well—in fact, I am absolutely unimaginative."

"Indeed, miss——"

"Yes," I answered, rising from my chair, "and what is more, I can tell you the name of the music played, one of Mendelssohn's 'Songs without Words.' By the way, is it in the music rack in the drawing-room? I will go and see." And hastily leaving the room, I went to search, leaving Sylvester to her own deliberations. Fancy, indeed! Why, they would tell me I was not at Woodlands soon—and how they were all conspiring! Well, I should get some satisfactory explanation from Aunt Mary, when she came downstairs. Fancy! the idea! I turned over the music once or twice, the piece was not there, so leaving the subject for the present, I went for a stroll into the garden. It was so pretty and full of the most beautiful flowers, and finding a bench under a spreading ash tree, I sat down to meditate until my aunt

should come or send for me. She might say it was fancy also. Strange, was I beginning to lose my individuality? I had never been nervous—always free from hysterical fancies. I would have seen a regiment of mice running along the floor without screaming, and the proximity of wasps or bees had no terrors for me. The only time we ever got really spoiled at home was when we were ill. Mother then became most tractably indulgent. How often I had tried to bring on indisposition in order to obtain what I wanted. I was very anxious to learn the violin, but could not get mother's consent. I knew illness would turn the scale in my favour; wilfully did I sit in draughts, wet my head before going to bed, drank vinegar, refused food, suffering agonies with the pangs of a healthy appetite, living on slops when I could have eaten a beefsteak. Nothing would produce the anticipated result. If my assumed *malaise* lasted sufficiently long to have a doctor called in, then my pulse ended the farce. He told mother he could find no constitutional disturbance, and that I was to take more exercise. I had to return to lessons, ordinary diet, and a daily walk in Platt Fields with our maid. It is needless to say the violin master was not called in. One of my governesses at the High School had said that the tendency of my disposition was to be a heroine or martyr at any cost. It was all very well to become a heroine, but the possibility

of martyrdom scarcely found favour with me ; it suggested physical and mental weakness, an unfitness for survival, and a general going to the wall.

Looking up from my reverie I saw Aunt Mary crossing the lawn and advancing towards me. I rose to meet her, and after the usual morning greetings, she sat down by my side. I thought she looked more charming than ever. A serene calmness overspread her beautiful face. As soon as I got the opportunity I related my experiences of the past night, and sought an explanation. She listened to my tale without a single interruption, and the expression of her face did not seem to alter, even at the most stirring points. After I had finished, she gently took my hand in hers, and with a slight tremor in her voice, which I saw was not natural, said—

"Alice, my child, do you really believe you heard this music, or that some one was in your room ?"

"Indeed, I do. I never fancy anything; besides, Aunt Mary, when I asked Emma about it this morning she coloured up and looked at John, who was in the room."

"My dear child, who can account for servants' vagaries ?"

"No ; but it was rather funny Sylvester started when I mentioned it to her."

"Have you been reading German fairy stories ?"

"No; and if there is one thing I dislike more than another it is fairy tales. I am of a very practical turn of mind, and it always seems waste of time to me to imagine impossibilities."

"Then let us think no more of our musical visitor," replied Aunt Mary, evidently wishing to turn the subject.

"I must know what it was," I continued. "If I hear anything to-night, I shall go down to the drawing-room——"

"To see your musical enemy?" inquired Aunt Mary. "Well," she added, "let us leave matters till this evening. We are going to a tennis party at the Rectory this afternoon. Have you a white dress you can wear?"

This was turning the subject with a vengeance; still I felt inclined to believe she was perfectly innocent of the whole matter, or else a very skilful dissembler. The servants had betrayed themselves; at least I felt morally convinced from their manner that they knew it was not "fancy" on my part, although they said so. Education does a great thing in cultivating self-control—not only cultivating, but perfecting it in cases of high culture.

Oakford Rectory was situated close to the church. It stood in large and shady grounds, surrounded by a brick wall which screened its inhabitants from the vulgar gaze. The Grammar School was on the other side, and some of the principal houses of the

residents were also built round the churchyard, forming precincts like those in cathedral towns.

Aunt Mary had given me a sketch of the Canon and his wife as we were driving from Woodlands. She said he was a High Churchman but not a Ritualist, and considered a good preacher. His congregation were of a wealthy and well-to-do class. People who had no desire to be rooted out of the groove of self-righteous complacency by startling opinions, scientific scepticisms, doctrinal controversy, or searching suggestions for self-examination. A homily on the life of David or Joshua, with a nice, comfortable, easy moral attached, was the style of the sermon given on Sundays.

Some of the principal tradesmen in the town were Dissenters, but the Canon kept on good terms with them all. Politically, their votes might be advantageous in returning a government that might be impressed with his fitness for a Bishopric (for the lawn sleeves were ever present to his mental vision). A Deanery he should have had before but an unlucky chance was against him, and a rival became the possessor. Socially, he considered it bad form to quarrel with anyone, unless absolutely obliged. He was well off, free from all monetary cares, and could afford to be magnanimously generous to those who differed from him in opinion. He had his troubles; prosperous, sleek, and self-complacent as he was. The one he felt most, per-

haps, was that he instinctively knew his two sons (fine, manly, young fellows, both in the army) did not believe in him.

They had seen the wires that moved the puppet, the false smile that was worn in society. Their innate convictions of the depth and reality of his religious opinions caused them to prefer any profession to that of their father. Their mother's intense worship of him, and puerile deference to his opinions, struck them as emanating solely from fear of a man who could be a Chesterfield in politeness in society, selfish, exacting, and tyrannical at home. His only daughter was about twenty-six; she had not yet married, and some people said the reason was, the Canon looked for too high a figure in the settlements. There was no doubt the young lady intended to make a good match, if possible, and now the great *parti* of the county was eligible. Lately, when any local wedding took place, and marriages were the subject of conversation, Canon Wilkins would say, with his blandest smile, "My Ethel will not leave her old father yet." At that moment he was thinking, "How was it Sir Charles Wynton had not proposed?" for he was an old admirer, and they had known each other from children. Miss Wilkins, however, intended that he should do so when convenient and proper opportunity arose. She was very friendly with his sisters, and thought Mrs. Robert Wynton, who was at

present taking the head of his table, "quite too delightfully charming." She was not pretty, had very good style, which perhaps goes further than mere prettiness, many a provincial beauty being lost for the want of the indefinable repose and "chic" only acquired by the self-possession given by breeding and position. In fact, her features were bad, but the charm of her manner was very great.

My aunt also gave me an amusing and graphic sketch of Mrs. Wilkins. The daughter of a half-pay naval officer, she was considered to have made a very good match when she married the handsome, well-connected Canon Wilkins, then only the Rector of Stonydull Parsonage, Clayshire. Her father, having been a great martinet, had effectually crushed the little individuality she naturally possessed, when a girl; and the powerful tyrannical egotism of her husband, had utterly destroyed the little left at her marriage. She was now but the reflection of a greater light, and the echo of a greater voice, viz., Canon Wilkins. The humorous portion of the community of Oakford had consequently given her the *sobriquet* of the "Echo." If anyone wished for her assistance in the way of patronage, taking a stall at bazaars, or distributing prizes at a school, they knew the most direct route, if time pressed, would be to ask the Canon. They would stop him in the street, making their request known in

tender and persuasive tones. If he replied he was sure his wife would be pleased to accede to their request, and had no engagement that he was aware of at such a date, then they knew the deed was done, and that, true to time, the poor little "Echo" would put in an appearance. If they asked her first, she would have said that she was not quite sure what their arangements were, but would let them know in a few days. This excuse and consequent delay would be to get leave. They laughed in their sleeves, and said, "Poor little Echo! I wonder if he will let her come." Terrible was the Canon in domestic rages; unreasonable, unjust, suspicious, and even cruel. He thundered, and his wife trembled, whilst his daughter defied him with a tragic calmness that need only have been seen to be admired. The servants turned up their eyes, and said, "A pretty minister indeed! to give way to such temper."

A great many people were assembled in the garden in summer attire, and two tennis courts were occupied. After talking some little time to my aunt and myself, Mrs. Wilkins introduced me to Mr. Peel, the senior curate. He was about thirty years of age, and unmarried. He was very dark, with expressive eyes, of a deep hazel-brown. About the middle height, broad-chested, and manly looking, extremely carefully dressed. After the usual platitudes about the weather, he conducted me to

a seat in the shade, and fetched me an ice, of which I was very glad, as it was excessively hot.

"And so you come from Manchester?" he enquired, pushing his racquet into the grass.

"I do. A long way from here, isn't it?"

"Very. Is it not a dreadfully smoky place?"

"Well, it is certainly in the town, but no one seems to mind it in the least."

"Not mind it?" he exclaimed; "but it is so bad for the health to have the air vitiated to such a degree by noxious gases."

"Oh! no one minds that; there are spasmodic eruptions of public feeling about the smoke, and scientific men talk learnedly about carbonic acid gas, carbonic oxide, sulphurous fumes, etc., and then it all subsides, and we go on as merrily and contentedly as ever, and hug our dear smoke."

"Does it not shorten life to live in such an atmosphere?"

"I do not know," I replied, feeling rather tired with the scientific turn of the conversation. "No one minds if it does." I said this rather purposely, to induce him to curtail this examination.

"You are very hypercritical there," he continued, going from sanitary to social topics.

"Are we?" I replied, taking another spoonful of ice.

"Oh! very. A friend of mine who lives there says they never praise anything without qualifying that praise by adverse criticism."

"Indeed! Does that proceed from excessive argumentative development evolved from residence in an atmosphere made up largely of coal smoke?"

He looked at me rather admiringly, and said, "How satirical you are. Is it possible you come in for any hypercritical criticism?"

"Oh! dear, yes," I replied, laughing, for he really was absurd. "Now, for instance," I continued, "what colour would you call my hair?"

He looked a few moments at my thick stubborn ruddy locks, then answered slowly, "Colour, eh! golden brown. No, let me see, it is a mixture of flaxen with a strong tinge of gold in it where the light falls."

I gave him a mock bow. "Very prettily described, and thanks. What would you say if I told you my greatest enemies (hypercritical, of course) say it is RED? My enemies say 'No, it is Titian's red,' whilst those who are complacently indifferent to me say it is sandy."

He smiled, displaying a set of beautifully even teeth. "And your admirers?" he interrogated. "I have none," I said, rising from my seat. "Let us go across the grounds and watch the tennis players." As we were crossing the lawn, Ethel Wilkins came running up.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I was just looking for you. Would you like to come now? They are commencing another game. Perhaps you are too hot," she added, noticing my flaming cheeks,

"and would rather wait till it is cooler? Let us sit here." After a pause, she asked, "How do you like Woodlands?"

"Very much, the little I have seen of it. I think it is beautifully situated."

"So retired, you mean? Oh! that is all very well in its way; you do not think you will find it dull?"

"No, I love the country——"

"But you have never lived in it?"

"That is true," I replied; "but for all that I think it is charming."

Here Mr. Peel interrupted. "It is a very old house, full of dark oak and mysterious corners."

I thought Ethel Wilkins gave him a warning glance, for he suddenly looked away, and tried to change the subject. Possibly, it was my fancy as well—I was really beginning to doubt my individuality.

"You have not seen Sir Charles Wynton, or the Hall yet?" enquired Ethel.

"No, we are going there to-morrow, I believe."

"Oh! you will be delighted with the place," chimed in Mr. Peel, catching at the opportunity of extricating himself from an awkward subject which brought Miss Wilkins' frowns down upon him. "It is lovely."

"And Sir Charles?"

"Oh! he is *so* nice," replied Ethel, fanning herself vigorously, "and so rich—such a fine

estate; and I have heard father say it is quite unencumbered."

"Nice?" I replied, "then I am sure to dislike him."

"Why?" they both exclaimed.

"Nice people are always uninteresting, humdrum, and stupid."

"Indeed! What term shall we apply to him?" said Ethel, turning to Mr. Peel for advice at this juncture. "I will tell you," he replied—"there is something about him that may suit Miss White; he is mysterious, statuesque, and has a reserved manner, which perhaps is unique in its way——"

Conversation then turned on Sir Charles Wynton, and I am sure if he could have heard all that was said about him he would have been flattered. After a time Mr. Peel sauntered off to join the tennis players, and Ethel Wilkins and I continued our chat, seated under a delightfully shady tree. She seemed very inquisitive about myself, and asked so many questions that I began to do the same to her. Amongst others, I sought to know more of the late Lady Wynton. She told me that she had known her most intimately —that she was very lovely and had died suddenly, three years after she was married.

"She was very devoted to your Aunt Mary."

"So I have understood," I replied, "but there must have been a great difference in their ages."

"Oh, yes; but she sought her sympathy and

advice ; there used to be terrific scenes at the Hall, sometimes."

"Scenes—why?"

"Well," continued Ethel, plucking a flower to pieces that she held in her hand. "I believe she was jealous."

"Jealous—of whom?"

"Didn't you hear?"

"No, I've heard nothing."

"Oh, well," she said, scattering the plucked fragments of flowers from her lap, as she rose from her seat, "It is all past and gone now, and I would rather not say anything further. Is not Mr. Peel a clever fellow?"

"I can hardly judge," I said, thinking I would be as cautious as she was.

"He is as clever as he is handsome, very musical—in fact, accomplished in every way, something of a flatterer, and a finished courtier."

I laughed. "What unclerical attributes."

"Do you think so? Clergymen are just as worldly as anyone else: you see it every day." At this moment we met Aunt Mary, who was walking with a gentleman; she stopped us, and introduced him to me, saying, "Alice, Dr. Leslie, a friend of mine, and a great psychologist."

I bowed, and we all commenced platitudes, whilst I took a gaze at him. He was about thirty-five years of age, rather tall, and of a slight build. His features were well chiselled and good. A

small, light moustache was the only hair he wore about his face; the head was admirably poised; the power of that head I shall never forget. His manner was calm and full of repose. The mouth, in which all the expression of the face may really be traced, was firm and free from sensuality. The whole face and head were highly intellectual, morally and mentally strong. He had the principal practice in Oakford, was a great favourite with most men, but not always with ladies, especially the spoiled children of fortune amongst the county families that he attended, for he did not encourage fancies, and was severe with patients of the hysterical type—those who wished him to convey to the anxious husbands that a trip to Aix les Bains, and iced champagne *ad libitum*, were matters of stern necessity, were vexed to find that their illness elicited nothing but the advice to keep early hours, live simply, take exercise, and drink water.

Who wanted such prescriptions in these days?

Because husbands were screwy with their cheques, and a little fright of possible dissolution of the beloved wife was needed to bring them up to the mark, was no fuss or alarm to be sounded? All the doctor said they were to do, was to trudge about the country lanes like haymakers, and get up with the lark before the day was aired; this was vexing, but he always acted on the strength of his convictions, and utterly refused to encourage

"nerves." As we were taking leave of our host and hostess, my aunt said that Dr. Leslie was coming home with us to dine and spend a dull evening, as his wife was away for a few days, on a visit to some of her friends. Canon Wilkins wished me "good bye" with great kindness, and said he hoped I should often be at the Rectory, and become great friends with his daughter. The Echo, who was just at his elbow, reiterated his expressions in a minor key, and copied the blandness of his manner in a subdued way.

As I was dressing for dinner, the wily Sylvester entered, closing the door carefully after her. "Excuse me, miss," she hesitatingly said, "but I came to ask you not to mention anything further about the music you say you heard last night, and the idea of some one in your room to Miss Lascelles, as she is very nervous." Seeing my advantage, I pounced on Sylvester, and said, "You say it is only fancy, yet I may not air my imaginations?" The beady eyes glittered; she made no remark for a moment; she could do mental fencing as well as I could, possibly better, as she had more low cunning—then she answered: "Fancies even make delicate people nervous. If you feel afraid to sleep alone to-night, tell me privately, and I will make arrangements for one of the servants to be with you."

"Emma! the one who coloured, when I asked her who was at the piano?" I replied, tugging at

my ruddy locks with a comb; "perhaps she would not come; and what then? If it is as you say, all fancy, what definite purpose can be gained by a servant sleeping in my room. Can she control the flights of my imagination?"

"Really, miss, you argue too much for a young lady. If I tell Emma to come, she would have to do so."

"I would rather be alone to-night; and if I hear the piano again, intend going down to the drawing-room and seeing for myself." Sylvester's cheek paled, under the thick coat of sallowness that her complexion boasted.

"Miss, your aunt will never allow you to be wandering about the house at midnight. I must beg of you to keep quiet; and if you are disturbed, or annoyed, tell me—I will arrange everything for you."

The dinner-bell interrupted, and stopped any further conversation on the subject.

Dr. Leslie did not say much to me during dinner, but I noticed at times he seemed to be giving me little glances from under his eyes, when he thought I did not observe him. After dinner, when we were sitting in the drawing-room, Aunt Mary left us a little while when a poor woman from the poultry farm had come to see her on some matters connected with eggs or fowls.

I thought it would not be a bad opportunity to say something to the doctor, who was looking over

a number of *The Graphic*. I got the question in my mind several times, but could not get courage to ask it. The words stuck to the roof of my mouth. At last I managed to utter them. "Dr. Leslie, is there anyone in the house besides my great aunt, the servants and myself?"

He slowly put down the paper, and looked at me, with an expression of more than surprise on his face, for a moment.

"Any one in the house?—not that I am aware of. Why?"

Then the floodgates of my fears were loosed; and I told him what I had experienced, and how every one that I had communicated with on the subject declared it was simply fancy.

He listened with attention, but there was an aggravating little sneer at the corner of his handsome mouth. Drawing his chair near to mine, he took my hand, and felt my pulse. It was evidently very normal, for he pushed his chair back, and twisting the end of his moustache, looked fixedly at me for some moments.

"Now," thought I, "he is going to say—it is all fancy."

To my surprise, he said—"Your aunt is related to you on your mother's side."

"Yes," I replied; "but she is the only member of her family living;" thinking, perhaps, he was going to suggest a great uncle or aunt being at Woodlands in hiding.

"Tut, child!" he replied, smiling at the deduction I inferred from his question. "And your mother—is she nervous?"

"I do not think so; I never believed her to be in the least nervous."

He bent forward, his elbows on his knees, wrapped in thought for some moments. At last he said, "I would not mention this again to your aunt; she is not in very strong health, and is impressionable. If you are annoyed by these sounds of music or mysterious approaches in your room at night, let me know. I will take the matter into my own hands; at all events, I will leave something with Sylvester, to give you before going to bed to-night, that will ensure good rest."

"I never take medicine."

He looked earnestly at me and replied, "Indeed! But when I order it you will do so. My patients always obey me."

Aunt Mary then came in, and conversation became general. I felt sorry I had told Dr. Leslie, after all. It had not done much good that I could see, except ensure a sleeping draught from the hands of the much disliked Sylvester. No solution, no explanation, had followed my confession. It was aggravating, to say the least; I had made myself ridiculous in the eyes of a clever and learned man; but he never laughed,—he only sneered. Well, sneering is not pleasant, but in this case it was comforting. A good laugh at

these so-called "fancies," from him, would have sent me into my shell for ever. When he left, I played some sonatas to my great aunt before retiring, and, on closing the piano, placed one of my silver bangles on the keys. If I heard the music at night, and in the morning the bangle was there, I should guess my rest had been disturbed by a visitant of the supernatural order, as such an obstacle on the keys should not interfere with a ghost playing. Should it be outside, then it would be from some earthly performer; but I should have to go down before the housemaid was up, as in dusting the inside of the piano she would naturally remove it. Arranging all this in my mind, I said "Good-night," and went up to bed. In my room I found Sylvester, standing with phial and spoon in her hand. She told me that before Dr. Leslie left, he gave her orders to administer a dose of this mixture to me, to ensure a good peaceful night.

I smelt the stuff; it was very peculiar. "What is it?" I enquired.

"I'm sure I don't know; Dr. Leslie never told me what he had put in. He got the drugs from your great aunt's medicine chest."

"Oh! I wonder if it's that horrid bromide of potassium!"

"Gracious, miss! what is that?" exclaimed Sylvester, thinking I knew too much about drugs.

"A fashionable medicine, very depressing, and

supposed to act on the nerves; let us call it anti-ghost mixture."

The woman started so much she almost let the phial drop.

"There *is* a ghost then!" I exclaimed, "or why do you jump in that way?"

"Really, miss," she testily replied, "I shall be very vexed with you soon; and I can assure you, if we call in Dr. Leslie, to cure your ridiculous fancies, he can be severe."

Crosspatch, I thought. Well, I had better take the sleeping draught, and get rid of the woman, so without further parley I did so, and wishing me a sulky "good night," she left the room. I bolted my door securely, examined every corner and cupboard, then lay down and was soon asleep, probably from the effects of the potion.

* * * * *

Music again awoke me—the same strains—the same hour, for I looked at my watch. This was too much. Feeling my nerves braced rather than stupefied by the mixture, I determined to go down to the drawing-room. Throwing on my dressing-gown, and lighting a candle, I walked hastily to the door, slipped the bolt aside, turned the handle. What was this? the door would not open. I tried again. No! It was locked on the outside. Feeling myself in the meshes of some undefinable mystery, young, inexperienced, away from home, I flung

myself passionately on the bed, and gave way to a flood of tears. But the narcotic overwhelmed me in time, and I slept regardless of fear till morning.

Waking in a hurry, I remembered I should go down to look whether the bangle was where I left it, before the housemaid was down. As it was only just six, I got up, and was ready to go when I remembered the door was locked on the outside the previous night. I tried it again; it opened at once. It was unlocked now, at all events? Creeping cautiously downstairs, not to disturb anyone, I went into the drawing-room.

The piano was open and the bangle placed on the outside!

CHAPTER III.

"Oh ! for the touch of a vanished hand,
And oh ! for the sound of a voice that is still."

—*Tennyson.*

Two or three weeks had elapsed. I had found so much occupation, amusement, and kindness, both at Woodlands and Burnham Hall, and no encouragement having been given me in my attempts to solve the mystery of the midnight music, that I had gradually become accustomed to the idea. Lately I had been tired, and slept so well that I had only heard the music very seldom.

Dr. Leslie had also reasoned with me, and made me promise that I would not say anything more about it to anyone except himself, should I be greatly disturbed. Certainly, he would commit himself to no explanation, and evaded my questions by saying that the hearing of the music might be an auditory hallucination. "Mind," he said, "I

do not say in this case that it is; but it might be. Hallucinations of the sort are in no way confined to insane people. They may co-exist with a perfectly sound state of mind, and will be always corrected by the judgment, in the simplest form. The study of psychology proves this. You possibly have been a little overwrought, and this idea may leave you as brain force improves."

"But, Dr. Leslie," I argued, "you give me the benefit of this alternative in your theory, that hallucinations co-existing with insanity can be corrected by judgment. Now I am more than perfectly convinced that I did not imagine any sound of the kind, but that the case is real, and therefore my judgment refuses any correction. Supposing, after all, I am, as I feel convinced, right in my impression, and that there *is* someone in this house who does play the piano at night?"

He leaned back in his chair, and dangled his watch chain, replying, "Well, supposing you are right. What then?"

"Why, of course, your theory of hallucination is wrong."

"It would be so naturally," he replied, smiling; "but first prove your case."

"How can I, when I find my door locked from the outside at night? This prevents my going down to the drawing-room to see who it is. I wish my aunt would send away that horrid Sylvester; it is she who locks the door, I know."

He laughed good-naturedly, as he said, "Now, Miss White, it is not that horrid Sylvester at all. It is that horrid Dr. Leslie. I ordered the door to be fastened."

"You ordered it?"

"Certainly."

"I should like to know your reason? Do you consider me a somnambulist, and that I should get up and walk into Burnham Lake?"

"My dear young lady, you have yet to understand me. In the first place, I seldom explain my reasons for action. In the second, I have not given you a very severe prescription. To amuse yourself from morning till night, and take plenty of good food, is not very hard lines; and if you have the key turned on you at night, I cannot see what hardship it is. Should you want anything you have only to ring your bell, and the servant would come."

"No doubt she would," I replied, feeling not a little vexed at his being so arbitrary, "but you must admit it is annoying to be treated in such a manner. It is ignominious—degrading. I am not a lunatic, which one would really imagine."

"We know you are nothing of the sort; but you said you intended to walk to the drawing-room to find out who was at the piano at midnight. I am your medical adviser by the wish of your aunt, and I object to your doing so. Some day," and then he stopped abruptly as if a sudden thought

had struck him, "some day I promise you I will give you my reason, break my rules of conduct, and give *you* a full and satisfactory reason."

I felt so angry I almost stamped my foot; indeed, I could have responded in a very passionate manner, but restrained myself.

He saw I was vexed, and commenced to say in a soothing tone, "Come, now, when did you last hear the music?"

"A few nights ago."

"But not the last week?"

"No. I have been too tired with playing tennis."

"That is well," he replied, rising to leave. "Now I will tell you rather a funny story apropos of hallucinations. A very clever man had the power of placing before his own eyes himself, and often laughed heartily at his double, who always seemed to laugh in turn. An amusing sort of proceeding, should one be in a dull country place by oneself."

He shook hands with me, and went to the drawing-room to see Aunt Mary. He was there some time. He seemed to exercise some mysterious influence over both of us. I submitted without further question to his wishes, whereas if anyone else had persisted in restraining my liberty, I should have ultimately rebelled, and that in a very unpleasant way. Still, I did feel instinctively a conviction that his auditory hallu-

cination theory was only brought forward to repress my investigating the subject further. He was no doubt very clever, immensely persuasive, and altogether in Aunt Mary's confidence.

We were invited to dinner that evening at Burnham Hall. I had been there a great deal lately, and liked what I had seen of Sir Charles Wynton pretty well. He was about thirty years of age, good-looking, of the fair debonair style, quite the typical English aristocrat. He was reserved and reticent in manner. Always accustomed from childhood to have his slightest wish carried out, as far as within the bounds of reason, he had insensibly cultivated an air of languor and indifference, that most effectually concealed the depth and passion of his real nature. Vain, generous to a fault, and, as a rule, kind-hearted, he was usually fairly popular. The chief characteristic failing he possessed was an ineffaceable vindictiveness towards those who in any way, either in a real or imaginary manner, insulted him. His revenge would smoulder for years. Time never effaced the remembrance of an injury or even slight with him.

The sudden break up of his married life after so brief a period doubtless had greatly affected him, more especially perhaps because the young life that had been so closely linked with his was an unhappy and restless one. If he thought he was in any way to blame by making his wife jealous,

not a suspicion of the existence of such an idea in his mind ever fell from his lips. Always accustomed to flattery, he had not remembered his position as a married man no longer rendered him a legitimate object for flatteries and attentions, however pleasant and delightful it may have been to receive them from others.

Lady Wynton was of a devoted self-sacrificing nature, but passionately, blindly jealous of her husband. Unfortunately for her, young, innocent, and indiscreetly trusting as she was, she had her enemies; and her very particular one was no other than Ethel Wilkins. Having been led to think for years, both by Sir Charles Wynton's attentions, and the opinion of society, that he had only her in view as his wife, when she heard he was engaged to be married to a girl much younger than herself, and one of the beautiful Miss Abbotts, who had always been her rivals in some way or another, she paled to the very heart, and vowed revenge against the handsome perfidious friend of her childhood, and her lovely rival. As long as she could, as far as it was possible, consistently with the laws of good society, she vowed the object of her life should be to make them both miserable, and as wretched as she could. A clever diplomatist, she felt she had suffered herself to be outwitted, in letting Mabel Abbott secure such a prize in the matrimonial market; mad at her stupidity, she determined that her moves should now be such as to

checkmate those who had checkmated her, and to do this effectually no sign would she give of the havoc this marriage was making in her heart. Her father performed the ceremony, and Ethel was one of the bridesmaids, and most effusive in throwing rice when the happy pair departed. She laid her plans—there was method and organization in her projected line of conduct.

Her first object was to be very friendly with the bride; that ensured her being constantly at the Hall, and frequently thrown in the company of Sir Charles Wynton. She soon succeeded in gaining the confidence and affection of her rival, and the woman she hated—they were always together, like sisters, people said. In confidential moments she endeavoured to draw confessions, or rather to get Lady Wynton to admit the truth of her suggestions. She owned that although she was very fond and proud of her husband, he was not her first love; there was that young fellow in the Hussars, that her parents would not allow her to become engaged to because he was poor; but her mother insisted on her marrying Sir Charles, on account of his position and wealth. Little did she think all she said, was at a future convenient and fitting opportunity to be conveyed to Sir Charles Wynton; facts distorted, motives falsified, in order to make coolness and indifference spring up between them. When the opportunity arrived, the mine well laid, with a good foundation of

flattery, the wary diplomatist told Sir Charles that she thought he ought to know *people* said these things—that his wife had married him solely for position and money, that she loved another, and that he had thrown himself away on an intriguing and adventurous family. She took care to screen her mischief-making behind an imaginary source, and called it "people said." Poisoning his mind with flatteries, like Delilah, she knew his weak point—an exaggerated idea of his own importance. Flattery would do anything with him, and Ethel Wilkins had not known him from a boy without having been thoroughly aware of the fact.

At first he laughed it off; said "What did it matter? let people say what they liked"; but the venom of suspicion, mortified vanity, and unrequited love, sank deep into his vindictive nature. He began to make mental comparisons between his wife and Ethel. The latter was certainly more companionable and clever, and to his mind in every way more sympathising. Ethel became his ideal of perfection. Certainly he never said anything either one way or the other; but he thought and brooded over it, and let it rankle. Then coldness and indifference sprang up towards his innocent and charming young wife, who could not imagine what she had done to cause such a change in him. One day she felt so unhappy, she took Ethel into her confidence,

and cried to her about his changed manner and indifference, and the mischief maker soothed and sympathised with her, her heart rejoicing all the time at the early success of the deep laid plan. It might be said that Sir Charles was a fool to listen to Ethel, and still more weak to be so actuated by her representations, as to become estranged from his wife ; but men, however clever they may be, if they have a corresponding amount of vanity, and are open to flattery, will be turned from their nearest and dearest friends, if once they suffer themselves to be subject to the unprincipled tactics and flatteries of the modern "Delilah," be she single or married—who, like Ethel Wilkins, succeeds in effecting cruel and revengeful plans, without injuring her position in society. At tennis or afternoon tea at Burnham Hall, she would purposely get as much attention from Sir Charles Wynton as she possibly could, watching the young wife—pale, and inwardly fuming—with the satisfaction with which a cat tortures a mouse. Aunt Mary was gifted with a strong, sympathising nature. In trouble she would be the first person to whom one would naturally confide all one's griefs. Lady Wynton soon felt her influence in this particular, and used to come to Woodlands when she had been more than usually annoyed, and cry about her sorrows. Once or twice she had absolutely refused to return home to dinner, her vacant place annoying her husband and causing

scandal amongst servants. On her return violent reproaches, recriminations, and scenes took place.

He would always defend himself, say she was unreasonable, ridiculous, that he could not speak to anyone without her becoming jealous. If she said she would no longer invite Ethel so much to the Hall, Sir Charles would assure her by so doing she would bring down the wrath of the Canon, and wound the feelings of a girl who had always tried to show her kindness and screen her from the unkind remarks of the envious. My great-aunt was quite unsuspicious of the deep laid plan of revenge, arranged to upset the happiness of the young wife; and, indeed, no one would have suspected the frank, charming, ladylike Ethel Wilkins. She always endeavoured to make peace between the husband and wife—but the breach seemed to widen.

At last a crisis came. Sir Charles Wynton, tired of these recriminations, thought he would try what a little absence would do, and arranged to go to London for a week or a fortnight alone. It was true that he wanted to see his solicitors, concerning the transfer of a farm on the Burnham estate; therefore his excuse of going on business was not groundless. As an unfortunate chance would have it, or some ill luck that sometimes seems to govern these things, visitors calling at the Hall one afternoon, remarked casually that they had seen Sir Charles in the Row, walking with Miss Wilkins and her mother. Now the Wilkins' were in

London at the time, although Lady Wynton had not been aware of the fact previously. As soon as these visitors had departed, little dreaming of the raging fire their innocent piece of information had lighted, Lady Wynton came over to the Woodlands, in a most excited state. No matter how Aunt Mary reasoned it would be purely an accidental meeting, she would hear nothing; and when she pointed out the girl was with her mother, Lady Wynton replied with the deepest scorn, "The Echo—that idiot!" and tearing her costly rings off her fingers, she threw them on the ground, saying, she would be revenged, and at once. Vainly did Aunt Mary attempt to dissuade her from any rash or foolish act; but she would not be persuaded, and returned to the Hall. On arrival she went to her room, ordered her maid to pack her travelling bag at once, and the brougham to be ready to take her to Oakford Station for the London train at six o'clock. She refused to allow her maid to accompany her, and giving no reason for her sudden departure, left, to the wonder and astonishment of the household. They naturally imagined she was gone to join her husband, and surmised what his anger would be when he found his wife travelling without a maid, or any suitable luggage. Three days afterwards, as my aunt was sitting at dinner, in walked Lady Wynton. She had just returned from London, and had ordered the coachman to stop the brougham

at Woodlands, *en route* for the Hall. She looked very ill and pale; her manner was strange and unnatural. She said she had just come to thank her so much for all the kindness and sympathy she had received from her; she could scarcely speak for tears, and would render no explanation whatever of where she had been the last three days. Refusing all offers of refreshment, she took leave after a few moments conversation, and entering her brougham, drove home.

On arrival she went to her room, undressed, and went to bed—saying she felt ill. She also inquired if Sir Charles had yet returned, or whether there were any letters for her. On receiving a reply in the negative she made no further remarks, but requested to be left alone, and not disturbed. About one in the morning her bell rang, and on the servant answering, found her lady ill, and almost in a state of collapse. A messenger was at once sent, on horseback, for Dr. Leslie, who arrived shortly. He saw at a glance what was the matter. Poison, no doubt, and, equally certain, administered by her own hand. He just had time to ask her if his surmises were correct. Stretching her hand out to the bedside, she gave him the little bottle of chloral, and said, "Yes! I have taken it. Enough, I hope, to kill me. I am tired of my life; I am not wanted here. I took it." Every remedy was, of course, tried, but without avail. No one could reach her husband under two or three hours, owing

to the trains and telegrams, at that hour. She became more faint and restless, and said she must see my aunt at once. They sent a brougham to Woodlands, and on her arrival Lady Wynton requested every one (Dr. Leslie included) to leave the room, as she had a communication for her ear alone. What that was no one ever knew or even guessed, but a short time afterwards, when in mortal agony, she looked at Aunt Mary, who was standing by the bedside, and said, "Remember—tell him." Half an hour afterwards she was dead.

All Dr. Leslie had now to do was to hush it up as far as possible for the sake of the family. Her heart had never been strong, and the dose she had taken purposely had, of course, proved fatal. Dr. Leslie satisfied all present inquiries of servants and others by saying she had a "weak heart." The medically uneducated are always perfectly satisfied with that explanation of a sudden death given by a doctor. They do not in the least want to go into technicalities. Wealth, position, and influence were all brought to bear in hushing up the scandal. A coroner's inquest was averted by Dr. Leslie's diplomacy, and the certificate so worded, in very technical terms, that the registrar of the district, who was an uneducated man, could only make out that young Lady Wynton died of one of "them forrin diseases." At the time I went to Woodlands, the only people cognisant of the real facts were Dr. Leslie, Canon Wilkins (but he

did not know the reason), and possibly Sir Charles, but he may not have seen the certificate. I am very certain that the neighbourhood at large had perfectly accepted the cause of death as from a "weak heart." Her family, who held a good position in the county, had to be considered, as well as the Wyntons, and a suicidal tendency might perhaps be an obstacle to the settlement in life of her sisters. Sir Charles was, of course, plunged into the deepest grief, heightened by remorse. The funeral arrangements were carried out in great state, and he ordered a most celebrated sculptor to carve a recumbent statue of his wife in alabaster, which was at present in the little chapel belonging to the Wynton family in Oakford Church.

Directly after the funeral he closed the mansion, and travelled abroad for two years; but he had now, as my readers know, just returned to take his position in the county again.

What Ethel Wilkins' private feelings on the affair were I cannot say. She certainly had no idea Lady Wynton died by her own hand, and of poison. Outwardly she showed no consciousness of having acted cruelly or vindictively. She did not mean her victim to escape her this time, but she had diplomatically over-reached herself, as her influence was waning at Burnham Hall.

All the match-making mothers of position in the county were now swooping down upon Sir

Charles Wynton, and he soon found he would be expected to return invitations, and entertain as became a man of his position.

It was a large dinner party at the Hall to which my aunt and I were invited this evening, and on arrival I felt rather shy at going amongst so many strangers at once.

The mansion was Elizabethan, with a lake of over fifteen acres of water in front. Quantities of trees were close to the house and the water. The rooms were large, and contained fine paintings by Vandyke, Rubens, Cuyp, and others. The entrance hall was of such a size, that it dwarfed the dimensions of the other rooms by comparison. It was panelled in oak, handsomely carved in high relief.

The dining-room, which was about thirty feet long, was hung round with family portraits, both by old and modern masters. Four long windows on one side looked on to the terraced garden, laid out in the Italian style, and ornamented by a profusion of bedding-out plants of gay and brilliant hues.

The family butler, who was a marvel of tact and manner, and two or three footmen in livery—blue and silver—were waiting at table. Canon Wilkins took in Aunt Mary, and I was told off to Mr. Ashton, the second curate at Oakford. He was a very quiet, pale young man—pale in views, in opinions, in temper and complexion. Brought

up by two maiden aunts of irreproachable position, they were always wont to declare that dear George was so good, that his mind was like a sheet of white paper. Indeed, for any impression the events of life had made on his passionless little soul, it was certainly unblotted. His inanity was simply irritating to decided people, who felt they would really put themselves to any inconvenience, if they could only rouse a temporary enthusiasm in him, on any subject whatever; but it was hopeless, and ultimately they gave him up in despair. The only thing which would ever seem to light a transient spark of fire in his pallid mind were the puerile inanities of the "Echo." These two, at least, had an electrical affinity—a principle of harmony co-existing.

I was at that age when eating is not a pleasure, so amused myself by watching the guests and doing a little mild conversation, suited to George Ashton's capabilities, between the intervals. There was a very gushing young person, talking "tennis" to Mr. Peel, who looked tired, and cast occasional glances at me. Several Juno-like-looking women were there—wives of county magnates, resplendent in satin and diamonds, but I felt quite as happy in my white frock and old gold sash. I had life before me. Oh! delicious feeling! so different to that when you have marred your happiness by something you might have done but did not. An opportunity gone, a chance lost—these are the

tantalising reminiscences of maturer years. When the ladies retired to the drawing-room, I followed, and, going to a little table where there were some photographs, amused myself by turning them over.

One of the Juno's took up her gold eyeglasses, and levelled them at me for at least five minutes. I could not help hearing her say to her neighbour, as she put them down, "Lovely!" Who was? It could not be intended for me, yet she had looked very fixedly at me alone. It must be the spray of hothouse flowers I had at my neck? They were very pretty, certainly. Some may think this was mock modesty, but I came to the knowledge of my beauty slowly and by degrees. The girls at the High School had insinuated I was nice looking; Aunt Mary had told me I was very pretty, but the term "lovely" had never been applied to me in my hearing before.

At last old Mrs. Rose, one of the most inquisitive old ladies in the county, crossed over to where I was sitting, and, taking a vacant chair, commenced to talk to me.

"Are you making a long stay?" she enquired, after having done a little preliminary talk about the photographs.

"I came for a month or six weeks, but I think I shall stay much longer."

Her countenance fell. I was a rival to her pretty granddaughters evidently, and a long stay might do no end of mischief.

"You live in Manchester?" she continued, without remarking further on the proposed length of my stay.

"Yes, I have always lived there; my father was a doctor in the place."

"Indeed? Oh, you ought to have a season in London. You should get your aunt to take you next year; no girl can say she is properly introduced into society until she has had one."

"I should like it of all things, but I shall never get the chance, I expect," I replied, rather despondently.

"Oh yes, you will," she remarked, in an encouraging, cheerful way. "Let me see, how old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"Oh, quite young; strong-minded, I hear, and very determined. Are you a women's rights girl? I cannot call you a woman yet."

"I think women have been content to pose as pretty, helpless idiots long enough," I replied, wishing the inquisitive old thing would move away.

"But, my little Socrates, they are not all pretty, or even interesting; still I do grant you one thing—the mass of them have no individuality—they are gregarious; what one does the other must do, if it is only fashionable; they do not in the least study their individual peculiarities. For instance, what is more absurd than to see women with

dairymaid complexions in red, or those with complexions and hair like a hank of tow, in sage green? Then a woman who has a neck ten inches long ties it up in velvet and frills, whilst those with no neck do the same because it's the fashion. Then, only look at the way they are all deformed by the present tournure."

"You are very funny," I replied, "but I quite agree with your views."

At this moment the door opened, and we were joined by the gentlemen. They each sauntered over to the side of their pet admiration, or ladder in the social scale. Canon Wilkins soon found out spiteful old Lady Bywell, whose brother was in high office in the Cabinet, and who would have great influence in the gift of the next Deanery or Bishopric. Sir Charles Wynton came over to me, and remained talking some time, whilst Mr. Peel was casting angry and jealous glances from the far end of the room. I rather wished he would move on, as several of the matronly beauties were beginning to regard me with rather spiteful looks. At last he crossed over to the eyeglass Juno, and I heard her say something to him about me, but all I could catch was—"a lovely young provincial!" Oh, was I indeed? Rising from my seat I went into the ante-drawing-room, and sank down on one of the luxurious sofas, opposite the portrait of Lady Wynton, painted by Millais. A sweet face, and one impossible to forget—soft,

pleading, blue eyes, and a quantity of fair hair. She was represented in a white dress and a coloured sash, with a leafy background to the picture.

I sat for a long time, thinking of her sad fate and early death, when my reverie was interrupted by Aunt Mary, who tapping me gently on the shoulder, said, "Alice, I have been looking for you everywhere; it is time we were leaving; let us come and say good night. Ah, you've been looking at poor Mabel's picture! lovely, isn't it?" and she seemed to want to hurry out of the room. I got up and followed, and the usual good byes were gone through. I fancied—but oh, it could only have been fancy!—Sir Charles Wynton pressed my hand when he said good night.

On arrival at Woodlands we went into the dining-room, where some soda water and lemonade was placed on the table for us, and divesting ourselves of our wraps, we both sat down to enjoy what is so dear to every woman's heart after a party, "talking it over." Aunt Mary seemed flushed, and for her, excited. When we had exhausted the nude shoulders of Lady Bywell, the wig of Sir Arthur Greaves, and the nice manners of Mrs. Robert Wynton, Aunt Mary hesitated a moment, and then said: "Alice, my love, I really believe Sir Charles Wynton admires you. Now you need not blush — stranger things have happened. Should my great niece make such a

match as this, I shall take care she does not go into such a family without fortune. My money is absolutely at my own disposal, and I would leave you ten thousand pounds at my death. He would not be marrying a beggar, at all events," she added, as she paused for my reply.

I am sure I clasped and unclasped my bracelet six or seven times before I replied, then I said in a low, hesitating tone—

"Aunt Mary, I do not think I care for him; at all events, I should not like to marry him; he is proud and conceited."

"And well he may be," she angrily replied. "Is he to think no more of himself or his position than a clerk on a hundred a year? Truly you are an unsophisticated child. Why, his rent roll is over sixteen thousand a year?"

"He is so reserved and mysterious."

"He has had sad trouble, child; you cannot judge of him as he once was, and as he really is."

"But it was his own fault," I argued with my usual obstinacy; "he neglected his wife and broke her heart."

"Alice," said Aunt Mary, in a stern voice, "I have told you before, and now tell you again, not to allude to poor Lady Wynton at night. It upsets me, and renders me miserable. The neglect you mention was induced slowly by a misunderstanding that grew up between two excessively proud people, because neither would

give way to the other, or seek an explanation that might have set all things right. Now we will talk no more to-night on this or any other subject. Go to bed and think well over the prospect that I can assure you may be yours if you choose—I speak plainly to you—the only thing you have to thank for so extraordinary a chance of so good a settlement in life, is, of course, my introduction, and your own beauty, and I do not think I ought to make you vain by telling you this. As well hear it from me, who have your interest really and keenly at heart, as from penniless admirers. It will of course go in a few years. Nothing is so evanescent as beauty, and so ill calculated as a foundation for a woman to pin her hope of happiness. The mind and a cultivated intellect will always last, indeed even mature with years. But now I will not keep you up. Good night, again, my child!"

What a homily from Aunt Mary! But marry Sir Charles Wynton I never could or would; and as I thought of good-looking Willie Merivale, at the Owens College, my devoted penniless admirer, I burst into tears, and sobbed till I fell asleep. Foolish girl! I had never had any practical experience of butchers' and bakers' bills, and what it costs to live: and as for position, my ideas were very hazy about that—I had been a little infected with the democracy of a manufacturing town.

* * * * *

I awoke with a sense of something being near me. It was the faintest dawn, and raising myself on my elbow, and looking towards the foot of my bed, saw a sight that transfixed me with horror. Lady Wynton was standing there. I knew her, of course, from the likeness to the portrait, at which I had been so long gazing the previous evening. She was completely enveloped in her shroud, with white lilies arranged about her neck and breast. The scent from them seemed overpowering—deathly. The pale, grey hue of death was on that lovely face; the eyes were sunk and heavy, yet still full of sweet and sad expression. Her hair had lost its golden brightness, and hung dank and clinging about her graceful shoulders. She smiled at me; then, raising her hand, pointed towards the room where Aunt Mary slept, and said, in a voice, the sepulchral tone of which I can never forget, "Remember—tell him."

Transfixed and immovable with horror at the reality of the awful sight before me, I remained resting on my elbow in the position I had originally assumed, until, as daylight advanced, she gradually seemed to fade away. In all my life, and I had lived nearly twenty years, I had never witnessed anything of a supernatural kind before. My pulse seemed motionless; beads of perspiration stood on my forehead. I did not think; I could not do so. Paralysed for the time with fear, and a weird fascination for the lovely apparition, I

remained like a statue. At last I rung the bell violently. In a few moments Sylvester entered, with rather a conscious look on her face.

"What is it, miss?" she inquired, with some anxiety in her tones.

I gave a loud hysterical cry, and saying, "Sylvester, I have seen Lady Wynton in her shroud," fell fainting into her arms.

* * * * *

When I recovered, I found Emma sitting by my bedside, sponging my temples with vinegar and water. She looked at me kindly, and said, "Are you better, miss?"

"Oh! yes. But I have had a fearful shock."

"Oh, miss! They will 'ave to tell you now," replied Emma, tenderly sponging my head.

"Tell me what?"

"Why, the 'ouse is 'aunted!"

"Haunted! I thought something of the kind; and by whom?"

"By Lady Wynton. She 'as 'aunted it ever since the day she wos berried; but don't say a word, or I shall lose my place. We 'ad strict orders before you come not to give you any information about it."

Sylvester entered with some tea and toast, and the conversation ended.

CHAPTER IV.

"Something the heart must have to cherish
Must love, and joy, and sorrow learn;
Something with passion clasp, or perish,
Or in itself to ashes burn."

—*Longfellow.*

As soon as I had recovered my nervous power I rose, dressed, and went down to breakfast as usual. Sylvester had not denied the truth of Emma's statement, but said she would rather not comment at all on the facts of the case, and referred me for all particulars to Aunt Mary. I knew that Dr. Leslie would not be coming for a week, so I forced myself to assume an appearance of perfect health, in order that he should not be sent for to prescribe for me. I could scarcely define why I did so. But I innately shrank from having the first supernatural appearance I had ever witnessed scientifically analysed, and by a man of Dr. Leslie's mental calibre and power.

Self-contained and self-reliant, I preferred to hug my convictions in my own way.

In the course of the morning, when Aunt Mary and I were sitting quietly together, I found an opportunity to describe my experiences of the past vision. She made no sort of exclamation of surprise during the whole of my description; the only sign she gave of any emotion was that she turned a little pale. When I had concluded, I saw it was with difficulty she restrained her tears, and pressing my hand, she replied, "Alice, I am very sorry it should have happened so. I had hoped your visit would have passed off without the unhappy story connected with Woodlands having come to your knowledge. I particularly ordered my servants not to convey any idea to your mind on the subject. Can you assure me my wishes have been carried out in that respect?"

"Certainly I can. Even when I taxed Sylvester about there being a 'ghost' in the house, she emphatically denied it, or rather equivocated."

"What made you think there was a ghost?" enquired Aunt Mary, peering at me through her eye-glasses.

"Why, the music at night, Aunt Mary. No one will say who it is, and no one seems to know."

"Oh! the music," she replied. "I think the hearing of that may be a little fancy on your part."

"Dr. Leslie has told you so?"

"Oh! no; but even if he had I am not guided entirely by him."

"A good deal though," I thought, but refrained from making any further observation, because I had promised him I would not discuss the matter with her.

There was a pause of some moments, whilst she knitted most industriously; looking up at last, she said, "Alice, what you saw last night has only been seen before by me, but as you have witnessed it, I do not intend to endeavour to destroy your conviction with any platitudes by saying it is fancy, and so on. Lady Wynton has rendered my life miserable by haunting this house since her death. This evening, when we are cosily seated by the fire, and without fear of the interruption of visitors, I will tell you the whole story; until then walk or drive, and let the fresh air brace your unstrung nerves. I will make arrangements that you shall sleep in another room to-night, and Sylvester or Emma shall remain with you; and dear child," she added, drawing me closer to her, "do not write and frighten your mother with accounts of all this; she will want you home, and I feel I cannot spare you yet. It is so pleasant to me to have a bright young life about this house."

I gave the required promise, and, leaving the room, ran upstairs to dress for a walk.

It was a nice bright autumn day, the air crisp and exhilarating. The trees were gorgeous in their

autumn tints, and there was the peaceful quiet about the landscape that is such a peculiarity of that season of the year—the battle and turmoil of life seem over, and it is like entering into a long rest. Taking the path across the park into the woods that led to Burnham Hall, I walked briskly along, the masses of fallen leaves rustling under my feet at every step I took, when I became conscious of footsteps behind me. Turning round to see who it was, I perceived Sir Charles Wynton. He was in shooting costume, with his gun under his arm; very handsome he looked in this *néglige* style of dress, which suited him to perfection. As he approached me he held out his hand, saying, in tones of surprise, "Miss White! who would have thought of meeting you here!"

"I came out for a solitary constitutional, as I have a headache," I replied.

"Indeed; I am sorry to hear that, but I trust your original plan of solitude will give way, and that you will allow me to accompany you. You are going in the direction of the Hall?"

"Yes. I thought I would cross these woods, turn down by the walnut avenue, and through the park, by the lake to Woodlands."

"A very nice walk; but will it not be rather far? You will come in and have some tea as you pass the Hall?"

"No, thanks. I shall not have time, as I do not want to be too long away. Aunt Mary

is not very well, and I am anxious to get back soon."

He expressed his sorrow, and we walked along conversing about the weather and approaching winter, till a turn in the path brought us out of the wood into the park and the avenue of walnut trees. The rays of the autumnal sunset glinted through their massive branches, casting broad shadows on the green sward, in some places now thickly strewn with leaves. As we approached the end of the avenue we obtained a fine view of the Hall and lake, the clear, still water reflecting the gables of the grand old mansion, and the branches of the splendid beech trees close to it. The view was so lovely that involuntarily I exclaimed—"How charming! How happy you must be in possessing such a place!"

"Do you think so?" said he, as we both stood gazing at the fair picture before us. "But the actual possession of fine places gives no particular happiness, as far as I can see, unless one has some one to share the natural pride of possessing such benefits. I often feel horribly lonely."

"How can you," I replied, "when you have such a houseful of people always staying with you?"

He looked up with an expression of pain on his handsome face.

"Have you never heard that no one can be such a companion to a man as his wife?"

I felt rather abashed, and could not think of any reply that would be at all to the point. I knew very well from report that he had neglected her; and as far as my experience went a great many people seemed to prefer any society to that of their wives; therefore I took refuge in silence. There was a pause for a few moments; he was the first to break it.

"Look here," said he, "there is a log of wood which will make a capital seat for us under this grand old tree; let us sit down for a few moments and watch the sunset; we shall not see many more this year."

I hesitated. "Oh, no! I think it will make me too late."

"Nonsense! You have an hour before you yet; and I want to talk to you a little—I never have any opportunity—you are generally not to be found when one does have five minutes' chance of speaking to you. There, now," said he, as I yielded to his wish, and sat down on the fallen wood. "Are you quite comfortable? See, the leaves are as dry as possible under your feet. Now we are all right."

"Are those the swans in the lake?" said I, pointing to some very white objects in the water, which seemed to my long sight to be of that species.

"Yes, I think so," he replied rather absently, while he levelled his eye-glass, to get a clearer

view of the objects to which I had drawn his attention: he seemed very busy looking at them for some few moments. At last he turned towards me, and in answer to my inquiries as to the result of his investigations said—

"Miss White, I am going to ask you a question. I hope you will not think it impertinent. How long do you stay at Woodlands?"

"Probably a month more."

"Then you will return to Manchester?"

"To my home. Yes, certainly."

"And you will come here again—next year, I mean?"

"Oh, certainly! I love Aunt Mary; she is charming, and delightful beyond description."

He took off his hat, and passing his hand over his forehead, as if in deep thought for a few moments, he replied—

"Alice—yes, you must let me call you so"—he continued, noticing the surprised expression of my face; "when you return, you will do so as Lady Wynton?"

"Sir Charles?" was all I could reply.

"Oh, yes," he went on, regardless of my surprise; "I love you, and have loved you from the first time I ever saw you. You are beautiful, charming, good—all that a man can desire. Come," he said, noticing my agitation; "have I been too sudden in declaring my love for you? Could you not see how much I admired you?"

There was a singing in my ears, and a noise like forge hammers clinking one against another. The vision I saw the previous night stood out clear and well-defined in my mind—the neglected, maddened, dead wife. What could I say. Should I rise, and with all the power I was capable of collecting, tell him what I had seen and heard, and what I was to hear that very evening? I knew not what to do. Discretion advised me to say nothing for the moment, to commit myself to no exaggerated statement in my present state of surprised and excited feeling. I had not expected such a declaration until Aunt Mary had the other evening hinted at the possibility of such an occurrence.

A thousand conflicting thoughts passed through my brain; the consciousness of the wealth of the offer, and the love for my family which might induce me to accept it; the conviction that I had no love for the man, or wish to link my future fate to his, ever coming uppermost.

"I cannot give you any definite answer," at length I replied; "I must have time to consider and to consult my mother."

"Certainly," said he, with great fervour in his tones; "I should wish you to have all the time for consideration you need," but, he added, taking my hand in his, "you will give me some ray of hope to exist upon during the interval?"

I was silent. How could I do so? I never meant to accept him. Self-reliant when acting

entirely alone, I had always felt my weakness under persuasion. I knew—I foresaw what my people would say at my refusing such an offer, yet my inner consciousness repelled the idea of marrying this man. If I had only myself to think of, but there was mother, and Teddie, Robert, and my sister. I knew the world would be against me—a supposed portionless provincial young nobody. I rose from my seat, and saying, "I cannot give you any answer, or make any promise at present," I walked on towards home, and as I perceived that Sir Charles was keeping up with me, I said, "Oh! please, please leave me!"

"How can you be so hard-hearted?" was his retort. "Cruel, cruel girl! Come, give me one word of hope, and I will go. Let me ask you a simple question; only one, indeed only one," he continued, placing his hand on my arm, to stop my walking on. "Come now, stop a moment. Surely you do not absolutely hate me?"

"Oh! no," I replied, "but I cannot stop talking now. What is this question?"

"You will tell me truly?"

"Certainly I will, as far as I possibly can," I answered, with a caution that was really more worthy of a barrister, than of a raw school girl.

"Well, then, Alice, the question is plain and simple; it needs only answering in two words, 'No,' or 'Yes.' Is this your first offer?"

"Certainly it is."

"You are heart whole then?" he replied, with a long-drawn sigh of relief. "Tell me truly," he continued, looking into my face, with passion diffused over every feature.

How should I reply? Was I, or was I not? "I cannot analyse my feelings," said I, "at such a moment and under cross-examination; believe me, in the answer to your question, I am telling you the truth. This is my first offer."

We walked on in silence, he keeping quite up with the hurried steps I was taking, in the vain hope of leaving him behind.

"I never thought about getting married," I continued. "I do not want to leave my mother, my brothers and sister; and nothing I have ever seen induces me to think married people are so very happy. In society I often notice that the man who treats any given lady with the greatest indifference, even rudeness, is her husband."

Sir Charles Wynton looked at me with something of surprise in his manner. Then replied, "Oh! you cynic! Could one imagine such cynicism could be found in a nineteen years' old young lady! You are much too young for such opinions."

"I must go," said I; "I cannot remain talking any longer. Aunt Mary will be anxious, and possibly angry, at such a long absence."

"You will not let me walk to Woodlands with you?"

"Oh, no. Please, please leave me."

"Silly child! one would think I was the wolf in 'Little Red Riding Hood.' Well, I will not annoy you any further; but you must promise me one thing; I may see you, and have your answer in a week? You will be at Woodlands next Saturday?"

"Oh, yes!" I replied hurrying on, as it was growing dusk.

"Then at Woodlands I will call on Saturday afternoon, and hear my fate from those lovely lips. Is it not to be so?" he inquired, anxiously, interrogating my silence.

"If you like," I answered, absently, thinking all the while what possible excuse I could make when the time came. If I said I did not love him sufficiently, possibly I might be laughed at, and treated with derision by my family. Love was out of fashion in this materialistic age. The idea of a provincial school girl refusing a man of great position in the county, and very rich, simply because she imagined she did not care for him sufficiently. Already I heard in my ears the derisive shout of society, at my old world notions. Times were changed; habits of thought and feeling as well. The loves of Paul and Virginia, when one could live on blackberries and a drink of crystal water from the spring, out of a gourd, were all things of the past. Arguing thus with myself, I hastened on. This had indeed proved

an eventful walk. Sent out to recuperate nerve force, by the inspiration of oxygen, in order to fit me for the hearing of a tragical ghost story in the evening, I had indeed fallen short of the purpose I had started with.

Again, people might say, because he had neglected one wife there was no reason he should do the same with another. My influence, should I possess sufficient power to guide a man of such a temperament, might reform him? It was very unlikely that it would do so. I had noticed that people low in the mental scale, always remained true to their type, notwithstanding any variation of environment. Personally I disliked Sir Charles Wynton; but it would have been very difficult for me to explain to any one sufficient grounds for the justification of such a feeling. Gentlemanly, good-looking, and amiable to a certain point, still he was not the kind of man I should ever choose to spend the remainder of my life with. Really, I had never yet taken the idea of a settlement in life in a serious form. I had a vague and somewhat visionary idea that some day before my twenty-fourth birthday I should, like the majority, get married, and, as pictured in novels, "live happy ever afterwards," but when this undefined idea took palpable shape, and came face to face with me, I shrank from the overwhelming responsibility of choice.

I was still sure my mother, aunt and other

members of my family would think I had no legitimate cause or reasons, for refusing such an offer; still, so far, I had said nothing decisive one way or the other to Sir Charles Wynton. I had a week in which to meet and bear up against the storm of opposition, that I instinctively felt I should have to contend against.

Reasoning in this manner, with a feeling of sadness at my heart, I arrived at Woodlands. The cheering gleams of a blazing fire gave out a warm light through the dining-room window, as the evenings were now short and chilly. Aunt Mary was looking out for me. "My child," she exclaimed with intense anxiety in her manner, "where have you been? What has made you so long."

I looked at my watch in order to gain time for a moment's thought as to my reply; I could only say: "I am afraid I am very late, but I will run upstairs at once and get ready for dinner."

"Oh! but stay a moment, and warm yourself by the fire. Are not you cold? It is so chilly this evening." And the fragile creature, with a little shiver, drew her woollen shawl closer around her shoulders.

I knelt down in front of the cheery blaze, stretching out my hands to the genial glow. Aunt Mary looked at me with a searching glance that my conscience felt extremely. "What a colour you have in your cheeks!" she exclaimed, "the walk certainly has done you good."

This remark of course increased my blushes. I did not wish at present to say I had met and had been detained by Sir Charles Wynton, as from what she had previously hinted, the cause of my tell-tale flaming cheeks would no longer be a mystery. I merely smiled in answer and rubbed my hands very vigorously.

"Your things have been moved into the white room," she continued, "and a little bed put up for Emma to sleep in. I thought you might be nervous at being alone again after"—and she hesitated a moment—"after last night."

"You are very kind."

"Oh! my love, I would not have you frightened in any way."

"I shall not hear the music now at all events," I replied laughing, as I tried to make a little joke to turn the subject.

"The music!" she answered, and then there was a pause, during which I rubbed my hands and gazed vacantly at the fire, feeling I had jarred some latent memory or nerve by my ill-timed remark.

"I have some very agreeable news for you. Your mother has written by this afternoon's post, in answer to a letter of mine, to say she will come next week and stay for a short time."

"Mother coming? How delightful!"

"Yes; I thought I should very much like to see her; and, possibly, verbal persuasion might

induce her to let you remain here during the winter, to keep me company."

"Yes, it would be very nice," said I, mechanically. But how could I remain here when they knew all? I must accept this, my first offer, or leave the neighbourhood. Perplexing thoughts, which agitated me, came rolling over my always active brain. The first dressing bell rang, and I gladly sought the quiet and uninterrupted solitude of my own room I found all ready for my reception; everything put neatly, and made comfortable. A pretty little fire in the grate, two vases of chrysanthemums, sweet relics of a fading year, on the dressing-table. In this room I was supposed to have immunity from the spell of hauntedness reigning at Woodlands. At the same time, I felt it was childish to have a servant sleeping in my room, because I was supposed to be afraid of a supernatural appearance.

Could her presence in any way control my sense of sight or hearing? Was I not just as liable to be confronted with the vision of the previous night, whether alone, or with others.

The prospect of my mother coming was indeed delightful to me. Never did I feel the need of her disinterested advice so much as at present.

Would she really blame me so much when she knew that I wished to refuse a man, whose neglect of his former wife had amounted to a scandal; and that the spirit of that dead wife haunted the

house of one of my near relatives. No doubt there was a terrible and unravelled mystery still existing concerning some unrecorded event of her unhappy life. Possibly Aunt Mary's promised account that evening, might afford some clue to much that appeared inexplicable. When dinner was over, we drew our chairs close to the fire, remaining by choice in the dining-room, as being more cheerful and cosy, with fewer dark corners than the drawing-room. Giving orders to John that we were not to be disturbed, Aunt Mary commenced her narrative by saying—

"You are no doubt aware that poor Lady Wynton died very suddenly. Malicious whispers have pointed to suicide as the cause, but no one is in a position to prove this. She went away to London, as you have heard, three days before her death, and returned at the expiration of that time, giving no clue where she had been during those days."

"I suppose to her husband?"

"No. He had never seen her since he left home a short time before. She did not join him."

"Oh! then I suppose to some relatives or friends?"

"All enquiries were made amongst such people, but no one had seen or heard of her."

"How very, very strange."

"Indeed it was. To this day none of her friends know where she went, and no one has succeeded

in obtaining any clue. The appearance you saw last night has hitherto been witnessed solely by me, but the servants declare they have frequently heard strange and inexplicable sounds. Still you know they can easily fancy what they wish. The description you give of Lady Wynton's appearance, so exactly tallies with what I have repeatedly seen in the small hours of the morning in this house, since her death, that it would be idle on my part to attempt to persuade so clever a girl as yourself that what you saw is fancy. I never gave any description of the appearance to a soul except Dr. Leslie, who would not have been the least likely to mention it."

"He would endeavour to disprove your idea of supernatural appearances by scientific argument, no doubt," I replied.

"Very probably, but he very often carries his scientific arguments too far. Life is short, and to discover truth may be the work of eternity. We live in too material an age. Scientific men will even explain the soul away, as dependent for its existence on physical forces. Let us believe that there are some spiritual mysteries that even science cannot fathom, and that we are not indebted to chemistry for the hopes of our future, and the deep workings of our inner nature. But I am wandering from the point. The day Lady Wynton was buried in the family vault at Oakford, with great ceremony and state, my servants asked leave if they might

run across the park to the bend of the road so that they could see the *cortége* pass. Promising they would not be away more than half an hour, I gave the required consent, telling them to be particular to lock all the doors before they went. I was left in peace and quietness by myself. I went into the drawing-room, and, sitting down, commenced to read the Burial Service. On arriving at the passage "In the midst of life we are in death: of whom may we seek for succour," I was startled by a faint knocking at the drawing-room door. Knowing there was no one in the house, I thought it must be fancy, and continued my reading. In a few moments the knock was repeated."

CHAPTER V.

"Woes cluster ; rare are solitary woes ;
They love a train, they tread each other's heels."
—*Young.*

"I ROSE, and advancing towards the door, openedit. To my horror I saw Lady Wynton dressed in her shroud, with her neck and breast covered with white lilies, exactly as you saw her. She was standing on the other side of the hall, close to the red baize door. The ashen hue of death was on her face, and her hair hung straight about her shoulders."

"Oh! Aunt, what did you do?" I enquired, as a shudder passed over my frame.

"I was too astonished to speak, and scarcely realised that it was my poor friend in death, and not in life, that I saw. I seemed to wait for her to speak. I could not move from the doorway, as my limbs failed me. She looked at me for some moments ; then, pointing in the direction of Burn-

ham Hall, said 'Remember, tell him.' A mist swam over my eyes, and, feeling as if I should fall, I leaned against the door. When I revived a little, she was gone."

At this juncture Aunt Mary was too overcome with emotion to speak further, and it seemed to me, her handsome face was wrung and changed with the intensity of her grief, as tears fell down her faded cheeks—beautiful still in a way—I was intensely pained and agitated, and advancing to her side caressed her, and begged her to leave Woodlands at once and for ever, to which suggestion she replied that, acting on Dr. Leslie's advice, she had previously sought change of air and scene in London and Brighton, but at each place she had been troubled, therefore she could not see that she would gain anything by leaving a home she had spent money on, to make pretty and comfortable. Time would probably alter things.

I thought a few moments; then it occurred to me, that I should ask her what it was that Lady Wynton confided to her on her deathbed.

She received my question with some surprise, and even a faint smile played over her face, as she replied, "Seriously, Alice, do you think I should confide a secret of the kind to any one but the person for whom it was intended?"

"It was intended for Sir Charles Wynton," I replied, assuming a fact.

"Certainly."

"And that is what you are to tell him—that secret, I mean?"

"That is what Lady Wynton wished me to tell him."

"And have you not?"

"No: why should I make a man utterly miserable? No one in the world would be benefited by the knowledge that he had been told, and a great deal of harm would be done to his future peace of mind. No; I weighed the matter thoroughly and well over, and arrived at the conclusion that I should always maintain a strict reticence as to the nature of the communication made to me by the poor girl."

"Ah! but I see it all now," I replied; "you will certainly be haunted by her until you do what she requested."

"That may be so, and very possibly is the case, should these things be amenable to psychological laws, as probably they are; but, of two evils, this, annoying and harrowing as it is, is possibly the least."

"Indeed! So sad as that?" I murmured, watching the forms that the glowing embers were taking in the fire. "Oh, Aunt Mary, what *are* we to do?"

"You must feel that I have long ago steeled myself to bear it."

"Do you see her every night?"

"No, I never retire till three or four o'clock in

the morning. I have not at any time seen the appearance after these hours, except on the day of the funeral."

"Do you sit up in your bedroom then?"

"Oh no! I dare not. She goes there, paces the landing, and seems as if seeking for something; passing in and out of the rooms upstairs, as if she were in distress."

"You remain downstairs alone?"

"I do. I have never seen her there, except the day of the funeral."

"Oh! how awful."

"Why so?"

"Oh! I could not sit up alone, under such circumstances. I suppose then you hear that lovely music?"

A peculiar expression passed over her face, and seemed to settle in her eyes, as she replied in a murmuring tone, "Lovely music? Why, did I not tell you, and has not Dr. Leslie assured you, it must be imagination on your part."

"Nothing will ever induce me to think so," I replied, returning to my standpoint with energy.

"Oh! well, we will not argue," wearily replied Aunt Mary; "see, it is getting very late. You had better retire; there will be no occasion for you to be nervous; Emma is, I dare say, waiting for you."

"Aunt Mary, I hope you will not be angry. I dare not go to bed to-night. I shall sit up and listen to the music."

"Nonsense, child, you will be as pale as death to-morrow. Come, I will go upstairs with you."

"No, I can't. I must stop here."

At this moment the door softly opened, and I saw the beady eyes of Sylvester peering round the room.

"Is the young lady coming up? Emma is waiting."

"No, she isn't," I replied; "this night I must sit up. I could not sleep if I went to bed."

"Where are you intending to sit up, miss?" she enquired, with the deferential plausibility of her accustomed manner.

"Oh! here or in the drawing-room."

"Until she goes to sleep," smiled Aunt Mary, turning to Sylvester. "And perhaps you had better remain here, in case we might require anything. What time is it?"

"Half-past twelve, ma'am."

"Indeed," she replied, "so late as that," as she took out her watch and looked, saying, "Ah, yes; so it is."

Sylvester took a chair, and fixed her cunning eyes on me in a most unpleasant way. No one spoke. The embers crackled and fell from the grate. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked monotonously. I felt sleepy, and at last succumbed to the feeling, and sank into oblivion.

I awoke with a start, feeling chilly and cold. The fire was out, and the lamp burning low.

Sylvester was still seated near me, watching, with a furtive glance in her disagreeable eyes.

On seeing me look round with a good deal of surprise, she said—

"Now, miss, surely you are going to bed, or am I to sit up all night? Your Aunt Mary is gone," she added, "she could not remain longer," —noticing that I looked round the room in quest of her.

"Oh! I will go. I don't know how it was I fell asleep so soon; but there was no occasion for you to sit up."

"Indeed, miss," she dryly replied, as she lighted the bedroom candle, "I know my own business better than that. Are you coming?"

As she moved towards the door I rose and followed her in silent acquiescence to my room. Why did I not resist? Why did I not insist upon carrying out my intention of remaining up all night downstairs? I could not tell; I felt subdued, overcome, mastered. How was it I fell asleep? Stupid and weak of me. . . . .

The next week mother came on a visit to us. Overjoyed at seeing her, I confided all my experiences, hopes, and fears, meeting with a ready sympathy.

Sir Charles Wynton had called at Woodlands the previous Saturday, as arranged, but I had taken care to be out. I believe he saw Aunt Mary, but whether he had told her the purpose of

his visit I did not know; at all events, she had never alluded to the subject in any way. I asked mother to arrange that I should have a longer time for decision—say a month; and she had promised she would do so; at the same time, she did not in any degree attempt by argument to bias my decision, but her silence made me waver. Naturally, she would desire such a match, but her extreme conscientiousness would make her hesitate to use any persuasion.

Mrs. Wilkins, who had long wanted me to come and spend a few days at the Rectory, now took the opportunity of my mother's visit to ask me to do so, as my aunt would not be left alone. A county ball was to be given at the Oakford Assembly Rooms, and the arrangement was, I should remain a few days and go with them to it. Mother and aunt, who thought I looked pale, and seemed low-spirited, would hear of no refusal, and accordingly my things were packed, and I was driven over one fine afternoon to Oakford Rectory. After being there a day or two, and finding out that Sir Charles Wynton and a large party from Burnham were to be at the ball, I felt I could not place myself in the position of meeting him. Consequently, to the unfeigned surprise of Mrs. Wilkins, I intimated my intention of remaining at home during that evening.

"Is it a fact you have made up your mind not to go?" she inquired, in a tone of disbelief. "I do

not like leaving you alone. You will be so dull whilst we are all enjoying ourselves."

"Pray do not think so," I replied; "I never mind being alone, I can always amuse myself with books."

"Oh! but fancy, to miss such a ball as this, my dear. All the county people; and such diamonds "

"I can imagine it all," said I, languidly turning over the leaves of the *Graphic*, "I would far rather not go."

The door opened; we both looked up—it was Canon Wilkins, fresh, rubicund, full of geniality.

"Oh, papa!" exclaimed the Echo, "you have just come at the right moment; this naughty girl will not go to the ball this evening. Is it not a pity?"

"Indeed," he answered, taking his stand in front of the fire, "and why this determination? Have you a headache?"

"Oh, no; nothing very particular; but I don't feel to care about it; I prefer to remain at home."

"That is, I suppose, unanswerable," he replied. "Wilful young ladies must always have their own way. By the way, mamma dear," he continued, turning to Mrs. Wilkins, "I hear there is to be a large party from Burnham. Wynton and ten or eleven visitors; I expect they will muster pretty strong."

"Indeed," she answered laconically, knitting as

if her life depended on the row being finished in a quarter of an hour. "Will Miss Talbot be of the party?"

"Dolly Talbot?" replied the Canon, with a broad smile on his face, "I should think so; Wynton must have some one to flirt with—vain, vain fellow!"

My hand dropped mechanically from the page I was listlessly turning over; I listened spell-bound.

"Vain is not the word," replied Mrs. Wilkins, "he is conceited to a degree. However, a good, sensible wife will probably take such nonsense out of him."

"Well, well," said the Canon, "we all have our faults, and if we take a scientific view of them, they are merely different grades of harmless insanity, unless very pronounced, or strongly accentuated. Most very vain people are mad."

"Mad?" we both exclaimed.

"Yes, mad," he reiterated, in his dogmatic way. "The writer of the 'False Beliefs of the Insane' seems to think that people who have a tendency to elated mania imagine that every one is admiring them; that they are to be very prosperous; that all their speculations will turn out well; that fortunes will be left them, and so on; that their influence in their circle is unbounded; in fact, Ego is their idol, a fetish which they worship."

"We must be very humble then," said the Echo, "or we shall all be caught and locked up."

We laughed.

"But," said I, as the thought struck me, "how about people who are always saying they shall be ruined, or are going to the workhouse? You would not call that elated mania?"

"Oh, of course not. That is melancholia—another form of mania."

"How shall we hit the happy medium," I inquired, "between the Scylla and Charybdis of elated mania and melancholia?"

"Let no peculiarity of temperament or disposition have a prominence; keep the line even."

"And be hopelessly hum-drum?" I ventured to assert.

"Hallucinations are a very common form of melancholia, and proceed from a depressed nervous state of the system," continued the Canon, without deigning to notice my qualification of evenness of temperament.

"Insomnia and debility are frequently the cause of the supposed appearances of ghosts," he continued, with a decision in his manner, as much as to say, "Who dares to differ from me?"

"Then you do not believe in ghosts?" timidly inquired the Echo, who maintained a secret leaning to morbid horrors.

"Believe in them?" he repeated. "How can we? Elementary science teaches us that the

elements of personality, are destroyed by physical causes at dissolution. There are some very well authenticated cases on record of supernatural appearances, but most of these stories are second-hand; a person has heard this or that. Where could you find the individual who has actually witnessed a case of this kind who would not miserably sink under cross-examination?"

"We cannot all be lawyers," said I, thinking of what I had witnessed at Woodlands, and which no amount of sifting would shake.

"Not necessarily legal cross-examination; a medical one would suffice for the purpose. You tell a doctor you see such and such a thing, of a supernatural kind, and his answer would be—Granted, you do see this; but the reason is that you are in a state of nervous debility. Some tension of the mind, under certain conditions, weakness, syncope, or asphyxia, is particularly favourable to the development and fostering of hallucinations. Not one family in a hundred may possess a single member who has seen a ghost."

"But one in a hundred may have seen one," I argued.

"Oh! that I don't dispute. Probably it is only one out of a great number that has spectral illusions or hallucinations. The ghosts one imagines one sees are clothed as one's individual fancy pictures them. For instance, you would see an elegant ghost, I might see a non-compliant

Bishop, and a savage would see one clothed in paint and feathers like himself. The great peculiarity of modern ghost stories is that the ghosts themselves never speak."

I started, almost visibly, but he continued, "We may divide the causes of hallucination into two classes—physical and mechanical; such as from alcohol, certain gases, poisonous narcotics, hanging, abstinence, or insufficient food. Mr. Savigny, who was on the wreck of the *Medusa*, and experienced all the horrors of starvation, saw himself surrounded with beautiful plantations and delightful people; and abstinence has performed an important part in the production of the hallucinations of monks and anchorites."

"What makes you imagine ghosts do not speak?" I inquired, as I felt I should like to know his ideas on the point.

Mrs. Wilkins laughed, and turning to the Canon said, "See, she has evidently seen one—sly, little puss. Come, Alice, what is it? Let us have the story."

"What's the joke?" said Ethel, entering the room, with her pet pug under her arm. "You seem very merry."

"Well," replied her father, as he sat down in a comfortable easy chair close to the fire, "so far from being merry, we have been discussing the most abstruse theories of hallucinations, and ghosts in particular. What experience have you to bring

to the common fund? We strongly suspect Alice of having seen one."

Ethel changed colour. "How absurd you are," she replied, kneeling down before the fire, and placing fat little Ruby on the rug. "Mother, has that brougham been ordered?"

"Certainly. Why do you ask?"

"Because you very often forget things, and there will be such a rush of carriages this evening, we shall not be able to get one at the last moment."

"What are you going to wear?" anxiously asked her mother. Then, turning to the Canon, "What shall she wear, papa, dear?"

"Really," said he, "the idea of asking me. What do I know about it? Something unconventional, at all events."

"That matter will be easily settled, then," replied Ethel, pulling the pug's soft ears, "I can go in my dressing-gown; that will certainly come under the lines of papa's definition of unconventional."

The Canon smiled, and leaned his head further back in the cosy cushions of the armchair, but he made no remark.

"Well, I'm going," said Ethel. Then, turning round, she suddenly spied me out. "You, here, Alice! I thought you were dressing. Sitting in such a dark corner I never saw you."

"She is not going to the ball," said both Mr. and Mrs. Wilkins at the same time.

"Not going! Why, what freak is this?"

"I would rather not. I do not seem to care about it."

"Well, Alice, you are a strange girl. Most girls would be delighted at such a prospect. All the people from Burnham will be there; Sir Charles and Major Wynton, Captain Talbot, Colonel Lees, Captain Alton——"

"Go on, child," interrupted the Canon. "Here, Alice, where is the Army List?"

"Go and dress, Ethel," imploringly said her mother; "you know what a time it takes to lace your white satin bodice, for I suppose you will wear that dress?"

"I think so," mused the spoiled daughter, "it suits me very well."

"How you women can bear yourselves laced up in the manner you do, I can't conceive," said Canon Wilkins. "Why, if my collar is a little tight, it sends me nearly mad, and to be almost cut in two at the waist must be agony."

"Oh! we don't mind," crossly retorted Ethel. "I had sooner be anything than a horrid man with a waist a yard round," and whisking up Ruby, she left the room.

"She looks very handsome in her white silk," said Mrs. Wilkins to her husband in a self-satisfied tone.

"All right, don't bother; just see she does not dance too much with young Bates. He has not a penny, present or future, that I know of."

Ethel came in again.

"Mother, I want two people to pull my lace. Can you come?"

"Tut, tut, child," said the Canon, rousing himself from his easy posture; "you must not; you will ruin your health, and contract your brain power."

"I don't care," said Ethel, "I don't want brain power. I want a fine house and plenty of money."

"Shocking!" said Canon Wilkins, holding up his hands in feigned horror. "I have often heard of the worldliness of clergymen's children, and now I prove it in my dear daughter."

"Indeed" (and Ethel made a saucy curtsey) "and I have often heard of the worldliness of clergymen, and I regret that I see it in my dear, dear papa."

"Hush, Ethel," said the Echo, looking up in a reproving manner.

"Oh! but now, which is worst—to tight-lace, or to angle for a Deanery? What did he tell Lady Bywell she did not look forty for, except, except——" and she stroked his handsome head caressingly.

The Echo looked uneasily at me in my obscure corner. This would not do. These playful retaliations were better suppressed, in the presence of a comparative stranger.

"Ethel, go now," she said, "you will never be ready in time."

"Go," said her father, "you are too saucy."

When she had left he seemed cross. None of us like our harmless little hypocrisies and weaknesses aired in the light of day by our children, who are sweetly pretty playthings at four, but often stern and uncompromising censors at eighteen.

I went upstairs to change my dress, and when I came down decided I would spend my self-imposed solitary evening in the library, and read some of my favourite authors. A screen at one end of the room partly hid a small bookshelf, and whilst I was kneeling down selecting a volume, behind this screen, the Canon and his wife entered. They were both dressed for the ball.

"I should hope Sir Charles will offer to Ethel to-night," was the first thing I heard. "She looks splendid."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Wilkins, "I cannot understand why he has not done so before, but you may be quite sure he will marry no one else."

I ought to have risen, and discovered myself. I could not move.

"He will probably be a difficult fish to land," said the Canon. "You don't seem to manage matters well. A third party is wanted in such negotiations."

"Ethel is so difficult to manage," replied the harried little woman. Indeed, it seemed to me like committing to a child the custody of a mad

bull, and then blaming it because the bull made himself excessively dangerous.

To my great relief at this juncture, Ethel's tones were heard in the hall, asking if her father and mother were ready, and they quitted the library, leaving me alone. Covered with blushes and hot with shame I emerged from my hiding place, and, taking the nearest seat I could find, sat down to think upon what I had heard.

So Sir Charles Wynton was expected by the Wilkinses to propose to, and marry Ethel! What would they say if they knew he had made me my first offer, and was at that moment waiting, and hoping for a favourable reply!

It was past nine o'clock, and I had sat for some time in a deep reverie, when I heard footsteps in the hall. They came nearer the door, which was opened. I turned round to see who it could be, and to my astonishment it was Mr. Peel.

He seemed equally surprised, and, advancing to where I was sitting, shook hands cordially, saying, "Miss White, who would have thought of seeing you here? I thought you were going to the ball with the Rectory people."

"I did not feel inclined to go, so remained at home at the last moment. But were you not invited?"

"I never go to balls; they are not places where the clergy should be found."

"But the Canon?" I enquired.

"He has a beautiful daughter to take charge of. But I must apologise and explain the object of this late visit. The fact is, thinking no one would be in, I came for the Canon's written directions for the next parish meeting, which he told me I should find on the writing-table here," and, as he spoke, he went towards it and commenced turning over the piles of papers, all duly arranged and filed.

I remained silent, indeed I could not imagine what to say. If Mrs. Wilkins should come in, unexpectedly, what an awkward position. It would be better for me to plead a headache and retire, leaving him in possession of the library. Just as I was getting up to carry out my purpose, he turned to me, saying, "Miss White, I cannot understand why you did not go this evening; I thought dancing was your speciality? Has Ethel been making herself disagreeable in any way; I know she can if she likes?"

"Oh, dear no, on the contrary, she has been most amiable; but I have been worried and perplexed."

He glanced at me with critical incredulity as he murmured "Impossible!" Now, thought I, here will be the opportunity of seeking advice from an unbiassed source. Mother and aunt were naturally interested, and I had never yet sought any other opinion on the subject; his manner, quiet, subdued, and impressive, seemed to invite confidence in trouble or perplexity. Should I tell him?

The opportunity now given might never occur again; I knew his judgment and discriminating powers were considered good; my heart became full, and tears came to my relief. Placing his papers down on the table, he walked slowly towards the fire, and waited for me to speak.

"I am very unhappy," was my choked utterance.

"Unhappy!" he repeated; "impossible, at your age, and with your advantages."

I looked straight into the fire, away from his face, and plunged into my recital. "The fact is, I have been unnerved and disturbed at Woodlands. It is haunted."

"By rats," he replied, with a calm irony which was exasperating.

"If you are going to talk in that way I cannot go on."

"Well, never mind, what is it? What have you seen?"

"Have you not heard that Woodlands is haunted by poor Lady Wynton?" I enquired.

"There is a report of the kind amongst the villagers, I believe," he replied; "but have you seen anything." I then went on to describe all I had witnessed and experienced. He made no reply beyond "Yes," or "No," and, placing his arm on the mantelpiece, and his hand on his forehead, seemed to listen with rapt attention.

"Then," I continued, "I have received an offer from a very rich man whom I do not care for; but

I know I shall annoy all my people if I do not accept him. It is true, I could never endure poverty; but, at the same time, still less could I endure the constant presence of a man I disliked, however rich he might be, added to which, any one who had not been kind to a former wife would be distasteful to me, should I ever consent to marry a widower."

"A widower!" he replied. "Is it possible! Has Sir Charles made you an offer?"

I bowed in silence, and not another word was spoken. The pause seemed long. I heard Mr. Peel go from the fireside to the chair in front of the writing-table. When I looked up he was seated there with his face buried in his hands, and a slight quiver of his shoulders bespoke some deep emotion. What had I done or said to cause this sudden change? Conscience whispered loudly, "He loves you," and the conviction passed across my brain like lightning, making me feel faint and sick. Fool that I had been!

After a few moments he rose, and, mastering his emotion, said—

"Miss White, Wynton has been before me. For weeks I have been desiring to tell you how deeply I loved you. My social circumstances have deterred me. Without family interest to hope for a living, condemned for life, probably, to a curacy, I felt I could not justify myself in proposing that you, lovely and charming, should share that

poverty, and be reduced to the narrowing, petty economies of a poor man's wife in our position of life. Frantically hoping against hope, I still trusted some ray of fortune might enable me to speak to you of my love, but it is all at an end. Riches are offered to you. Take them and be happy! Have you not yourself said that you could not endure poverty?" And the veins of his forehead swelled up with the vehemence of his passion, as the expression of his face altogether changed with despair and jealousy.

"Mr. Peel," I commenced, but he would not hear a word, and continued—

"Wynton's position and wealth are undeniable. The other points in his character you can find out for yourself."

"The opportunity for me to do so will never arise," I exclaimed.

"Nonsense!" said he. "Do I not know the world better than you? Friends' persuasions and the prospect of riches will leave you as helpless as a reed in your decision. You said yourself a few moments ago you could not endure poverty," and he tore a card he had in his hand into tiny pieces with the minute attention to detail that passion gives for the time. "Riches are offered; take them, and never trouble yourself about the void you will have left in another heart."

"Sir Charles Wynton's riches have no attraction for me."

"So you say now, but time and persuasion will prove you as keenly alive to the value of them as most of the world. Could you not see how much I loved you—how intensely I longed to speak and tell you of it? and it is this hesitation that has made me too late. You always met me with bright smiles and pleasant words, and encouraged my false hopes that you reciprocated my affection. No doubt you have long ere this accepted this offer, and the thought of seeking my advice on the subject, in order to enrage and pique me, suggested itself to you."

"Mr. Peel!" I answered, with anger, "you have no right to say such things; they are absolutely untrue! I believed from you I might obtain the disinterested advice I so much need. I have been mistaken."

"Grievously so," he replied, "when you find that the man whose advice you ask as to accepting your first offer, is madly in love with you himself."

"I knew nothing of the kind."

"You were not so obtuse in the case of Sir Charles Wynton."

"I never expected an offer from him."

"Tchut!" he retorted, in a tone of grating scorn, as he took up a pen from the inkstand, and dug it into the table till it broke.

"Come now," he suddenly continued, after a few moments' pause, as he brought his hand down on the table with some force, "let us reason

together, and effect a compromise. You are undecided about accepting Wynton's offer. Refuse him, and accept the position of my wife. I offer you an income of £200 a year, with the greatest improbability of its ever increasing. Straitened means are synonymous with very little society. Individually, I can give a self-sacrificing love, combined with jealousy, cruel and passionate, a querulous and exacting temper, unreasonable to a degree when provoked. Now," he continued, without noticing my frightened looks, for, indeed, the strangeness of his manner was alarming me excessively. His eyes, metallic in their lustre, absolutely scintillated with the fury of his passion, which became grand as it rose—"Now, I await your answer!"

I looked round nervously, in the vain hope of escaping. He held my hand as in a vice; my heart beat fast, and I feared I should swoon.

"You hesitate? You despise the unconventional terms of such an offer? It is well. You are as false, as mercenary, as heartless as the rest of your sex. Never will I see you again. You are cold, obdurate, calculating, selfish;" and he hissed these words in my hear. "Go!" and he flung my hand from him. Trembling in every limb, he walked to the writing-table, and opened a small drawer. What was he going to do? What vein of madness had I aroused in him? I crossed the room, intending to open the door. He anticipated

my wish, and said, "You need not move. I am leaving at once myself," and he left the room. I heard his retreating footsteps pass down the hall, and the door slam after him.

What had he taken out of that drawer? I had heard Ethel say her father kept a revolver there. Was he gone to load it, and would he return to shoot me? Never before had I witnessed the passionate fury of a strong man, aggravated by the most maddening jealousy. Seeing some pieces of card strewed on the floor, I stooped to pick them up. It was my photograph, torn into a hundred pieces. He had evidently carried it in his pocket. Unfortunate girl that I was to inspire so much affection, and reciprocate none. There was no doubt a convent would be the best place for me. I had better go to my room at once, for fear he should return. Was he mad? Who could say what dormant molecule in his brain had been evolved and engendered by disappointment and jealousy? I locked and double-locked my door, and wrapping myself in a warm shawl, sat down to listen for the return of the Wilkinses. I felt I should be safer then. He might come back and shoot some one; nobody could tell to what such frenzy would lead. Carriages rolled by; each one, I hoped, would stop at the Rectory gates, and the tension of my mind be set at rest. One—two—three—struck. I got more chilly, and hugged my shawl around me. At last the sound of wheels at

the gates banished my nervous fears, and soon afterwards I heard moving about and talking. Then Ethel's footsteps came past my door. Soon all the house was quiet again, and I fell asleep.

Next morning, while we were at breakfast, and Ethel was recounting all her adventures, with the number of partners she had, the footman came into the room, and told the Canon a person outside wanted to speak to him. He rose, and was absent a few moments, when he returned, with a look of wonder on his face.

"Is it not funny," he commenced. "Peel's landlady has been here to enquire for him, as he has not been home all night."

"How very odd," said Ethel. "I saw him at Jotson's, the stationer's, yesterday afternoon. You saw him as well, didn't you, Alice?"

"Yes," I faintly replied.

"Now you are turning very pale," said the teasing girl. "I declare she is in love with him!"

"Depend on it," said Mrs. Wilkins, as she poured out the coffee, "he had a telegram from his mother, who has been very ill, and he went off in a hurry to catch the only London train at that time. He will send a telegram in a few hours."

I knew none of the servants had seen him come in last evening, as the door opened without a latch, and he was in the habit of walking in and out of the Rectory as he liked.

I did not know what to say; having allowed

the fact of his having been at the Rectory the previous evening to pass by in silence, I could not enlarge on the subject.

Discussion went on nearly all breakfast time, and I fell more hopelessly into the mire of deceit. In the morning, as we were arranging some flowers in vases in the drawing-room, the Canon came striding in, with his hands in his pockets; a trick he always had if he was much annoyed or perplexed. "Look here, Ethel, the drawer in the library writing table is open, and my revolver gone."

I held on to the table to prevent falling, whilst I endeavoured to conceal my emotion by arranging a flower. This was what Mr. Peel had taken out.

"How strange," replied Ethel. "Could Mr. Peel have been here last evening?"

"He was to have come about the arrangements for the parish meeting, but none of the servants saw him. But," said he, suddenly turning to me, "did you go into the library? You did not take it out of the drawer, I suppose? American young ladies do carry revolvers, I believe, but we draw the line here."

"Oh! papa, she has a horror of firearms," exclaimed Ethel, luckily for me. "She would be as bad as James the First when he saw a sword unsheathed, if she were to see a pistol."

"Well, well, it is very odd. I shall go down to

Mrs. Buck's, and see if they have heard anything of Peel. I don't like the look of things."

"Why on earth should he shoot himself?" calmly inquired Ethel. "I know of nothing that would have induced him to do so. He has never let concealment prey upon his damask cheek," and she laughed softly to herself. "Oh! papa, it will be all right. Some one has taken it away to clean, or something of the kind."

CHAPTER VI.

"Leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge."

—*Shakspere.*

THE Canon walked uneasily out of the room without appearing to notice Ethel's suggestions. Turning to me she remarked—

"Is it not strange?"

"Probably he has gone to London, as your mother thought," I replied, still arranging the flowers.

"He may have done so," she said, in a musing manner, "but who could have taken the revolver out of the drawer, if he didn't?"

Ruby came in barking and frisking, so the conversation and current of thought was changed. I felt relieved to think I was returning to Woodlands that morning; and an indescribable feeling of inward satisfaction came over me, when I heard that John and the pony carriage had arrived.

On my return, Aunt Mary and mother certainly seemed vexed to think I had absented myself from the ball, and the excuses I put forward were met with reproof. I thought it would be advisable to mention something about Mr. Peel's disappearance from his lodgings, but both mother and aunt came to the same conclusion as Mrs. Wilkins—that he had started suddenly, on his mother's account, by the night train, and that sooner or later in the day a telegram would be received to that effect. But I felt inwardly intensely uncomfortable, on account of the frenzied state of excitement he was in when he left the Rectory at ten o'clock. There was a train to London at 10-25; but would he have taken that? I did not think so. Preparations were being made for mother's return to Manchester. She had promised Aunt Mary I should remain with her during the winter, and I was told to do my utmost to make her happy and comfortable. I think I would almost have been thankful to have returned to smoky old Greenheys, and to the innocent simplicity of my former life, instead of being surrounded with mystery and secret annoyances; but my mother's wishes had always been unwritten laws to me.

I could see, in a quiet way, she was vexed at my unreasonable obstinacy in not accepting so splendid an offer, and this fretted me. On leaving she pressed me to her heart, and told me how much she wished to see me happy; that she had

placed me in Aunt Mary's charge; and that in all things I must be guided by her wishes, and submit to what she chose. Could she have foreseen what those wishes and commands would be, would she have left me alone at Woodlands?

It was very evident my people thought I was doing a very stupid thing in refusing to accept Sir Charles, but I did think my own feelings in the matter should have been considered. I objected, first, to the man; secondly, to enter a family that had an important secret kept from them by my great-aunt. Her logic might be good in the abstract; but I thought death-bed wishes should be observed and carried out. Very probably he was not aware of the existence of this secret, and of the fact of his late wife haunting Woodlands. The reasons for her doing so—the mystery of the music—all these things might be unknown to him. Should I tell him? And if I did, would it not make him quite as anxious not to marry me as he was now to do so?

The idea struck, took root, and grew in my brain. I determined when the opportunity arrived, and he recommenced his suit, to tell him all I knew, regardless of consequences, or Aunt Mary's anger, for I felt instinctively such a proceeding on my part would vex her exceedingly. Then I thought again of mother's reproachful glances and anxious looks, and of all the future grandeur I was ruthlessly throwing away.

Should I persuade Aunt Mary to tell him, and, under strong home pressure, accept the offer with such a compromise? It was, however, hardly likely she would do so.

In the evening, whilst we were sitting over our dinner, Aunt Mary said, "So Mr. Peel is found?"

I turned alternately hot and cold, and rudely interrogated, "Found?"

"Yes. I was at the Hall this afternoon and saw Dolly Talbot, who had just driven over from Oakford. It seems he walked over to his brother's at Farley——"

"At so late an hour?"

"Oh! it is only eight miles from Oakford, and I suppose he would soon do that. But how do you know it was late when he started?"

I blushed furiously. "Oh! I only imagined it was."

"At all events, when he arrived there, they saw he was very queer; and got him to bed, and sent for a doctor. He had a sunstroke some years ago, and anything throws his mind off its balance. He has been overworking himself about getting these new schools built. A very charming young man, but too clever."

I made no remark, but strove to hide the tell-tale colour which would keep rushing into my cheeks.

Aunt Mary did not seem to observe my confusion, and continued, saying: "By the way, Alice,

I saw Sir Charles this afternoon, and he is coming over to call to-morrow to see you. I trust now you will act like a sensible girl, and that after he leaves, I may have to congratulate you."

I looked down at my plate, and torrents of thought rushed through my brain; moral courage seemed to fail me; my determination paled. At last I nerved myself, and replied—

"Aunt Mary, if I did accept the offer, which is unlikely, I could only do so under certain conditions."

"And what may they be—money settlements? I have told you before, in the event of your fulfilling my wishes on this point that I will leave you ten thousand pounds, and I will take care it is strictly settled on yourself."

"It is not about money," said I, still holding my head down.

"No?" she replied interrogatively.

"It is this. Will you tell Sir Charles Wynton the secret confided to you for him by Lady Wynton on her death-bed? Will you also explain the mystery of the nocturnal music? Is it in any way connected with Lady Wynton's haunting this house? It is not that I have any morbid curiosity, but I do greatly object to accepting the offer of a man from whom all these secrets are kept by my near relative."

Every atom of colour had faded from Aunt Mary's face, when I ventured to look up; for some

moments she was too surprised to speak; then rising from the table, with that queenly dignity so natural to her every movement, she replied—

"Do you dare to make terms with me?—a child of your age. Do I not know, by a life's experience, a thousand times better, what is advantageous to be done, under the peculiar circumstances you have mentioned, than a simple provincial school-girl? You had better know that your mother has left you entirely in my charge, and under my control, and equally with myself wishes this marriage. You have yet to learn that my will is stronger than yours; and such being the fact, your obeying that will is a certain termination of a ridiculously high-flown idea on your part of a refusal. No suggestions that you have made will be carried out by me, and I shall expect you to behave as your mother and I wish you to do. Your education, complete and thorough as it may have been, has fallen far short of its intended aim, if you think you are to dictate methods of worldly diplomacy to a woman who is twice your age."

And laughing in an hysterical kind of manner she sailed out of the room. It was very evident I had deeply offended her, still more so that I had not the gentle, ductile creature to deal with that heretofore I had imagined. I wondered now at my own daring, and the sternness and determined words of Aunt Mary sank heavily in my heart. Possibly I had said too much, but there was an

obstinacy inherent in my nature which led me to carry out any plan I had arranged or conceived, without duly weighing all the bearings of such a method.

Leaving the table I went into the drawing room; no one was there, and feeling like a culprit I sat down to read as well as I could. I fancied I heard noises upstairs, as of people running to and fro; then a banging of doors, and carriage wheels in the drive.

Could Aunt Mary be ill? I felt afraid to go and see, for I knew if she were, my impertinence had been the cause.

Soon all seemed still, when, to my surprise, Dr. Leslie entered the drawing-room. He was rather flushed; and there was that stern look on his face, which he had at times. He was in evening dress, and seemed to have been fetched over in a hurry to Woodlands. He greeted me in an excessively cold manner; and told me he had been sent for to see Aunt Mary, who was ill and upset, and that, from what he understood, I had been the cause.

Of course I expressed my regret, at the same time I did not know what right he had to interfere quite so much. "You have referred to annoying matters; and your aunt is in that state of nervousness, it naturally upsets her. You have also wished her to tell Sir Charles Wynton, his late wife haunts this house?"

Indeed, thought I, Aunt Mary makes Dr. Leslie

quite a confidant. I wondered if she had told him of my offer? My pride felt hurt.

"Surely," I replied, "I may say what I like to my aunt without any outside interference—she should not tell you these things."

A look of sceptical irony came over his handsome face, as he replied, "Excuse me, Miss White—you err greatly. A physician requires to know the mental, as well as physical wounds of his patients."

"I do not see it in the least."

"Because you know nothing of psychology; of the power of the mind over the body; of the subservience of the physical powers to the mental. We see no use in prescribing for patients who only show us one side of the picture, and perhaps are breaking their hearts at the other."

"I am not breaking mine."

"Perhaps not," he calmly replied, "but I fear your aunt is crushing her fine mental powers and physical strength, through a grief she is endeavouring to keep to herself."

"She seems strange at times," I replied.

He assented, and continued by saying—"Have you noticed an inability in her to fix her attention on any subject for an ordinary length of time?"

"I think perhaps I have."

"Her handwriting, too, is changing. This affords a very accurate gauge of mental deterioration; and the inability of concentrated mental effort indicates cerebral softening."

"Indeed! What can be done for her?"

"She must be soothed in every possible way. Do not run counter to her wishes, and never mention the mystery of Woodlands to her. It will do no good, and may be productive of much mischief."

"I must speak to someone," I replied; "it is so very hard to keep it all to myself."

"Speak to me," he said, in such a kind way that my anger at his interference seemed to melt away, "and do not worry your aunt. If you give way to hysterical fancies, you do her an immense deal of harm. The true principle of cure for the curable, in psychological cases, is association with healthy minds. To keep these as a people apart, is entirely opposed to scientific observation. Indeed, so strongly do I feel the truth of my statement that I should feel much pleased if instead of sleeping in the white room, with Emma to bear you company, you would return and occupy your original room, fearless of anything you may imagine you would see or hear. Your doing this would greatly weaken your aunt's consciousness in the reality of her illusions, and at present your action tends to foster them."

"How could I do such a thing, Dr. Leslie?"

"Perfectly, if you determined to do it; or if you allowed yourself to be mastered by a stronger will, and submit to those dictates. For instance, let me say you *must* do this—that I will hear of

no excuse whatever. Now, will you?" he enquired, looking earnestly into my face.

I thought a few moments. "I cannot promise yet. I have a great deal to vex me just now."

He rose from his chair, and stood for some moments gazing into the fire, with his back turned to me. I fancied he was wanting to say something, but possibly second thoughts deterred him, as, turning from the fire, he abruptly took leave, saying, "I will see you and talk more to you another day."

The next morning, when I came in from my usual walk, John met me in the hall, saying Miss Wilkins had called, and was waiting to see me in the drawing-room. Glad to find it was only her, and not my dreaded visitor, I went into the room fresh and glowing from the frosty outside air. She was seated near the window looking on to the lawn, and rose to greet me in a very cold and constrained manner, which rather chilled my exuberant spirits, except that I knew she was as fickle and changeable as the wind.

She was handsomely dressed, in a well-made tailor costume, and a black hat with white wings, and looked extremely nice.

After we had talked a little time, she said, "Alice, I've come on rather a curious errand this morning. You have, I dare say, heard that Mr. Peel walked over to his brother's at Farley the other night, instead of returning to his lodgings.

It seems he must have felt ill, as he was so strange on arrival that they got him to bed and sent for a doctor. I believe he has some attack of the brain, and he is occasionally subject to them. They say he was almost beside himself."

"What about?" I asked, with as much coldness in my manner as I could put on.

"No one knows. At least, I have not been told. Parish work and schools and soup kitchens on the brain, I suppose. At all events, he is there, and likely to be for some time. He was to have come to the Rectory the evening we went to the ball, but the servants said they never saw him; yet it turns out an old woman who comes to wash was leaving to go home at the very time he crossed the hall. She never mentioned it, simply because she took it as a matter of course, knowing he went in and out of the house as he liked. You were in the library in the evening?"

"I was."

"And were you not tearing up the papers I gave you for those cushions for the bazaar, and putting them into the waste paper basket?"

"I did do a little of it; but I got tired and took up a book."

Ethel walked from her seat to the door, and then back again twice, and planting herself immediately in front of me, she hissed out with all the vigour she was capable of, "Oh! you little cat!"

"What do you mean?" I enquired, as soon as I had recovered from my surprise.

"Mean!" she almost shrieked in her fury. "Why you stayed away from the ball on purpose to see Mr. Peel."

"It is outrageously false," I exclaimed, "and no one but you would say such a thing."

"Listen," she answered; "the revolver, loaded, was found by the housemaid in the waste-paper basket, underneath the mass of torn paper. *You* put it there."

"I! Why I would die rather than touch a weapon of the kind."

"Circumstantial evidence is terribly against you;" and she continued to give me a tirade of invective and reproach.

How absurd it was; indeed it was impossible to reason with her, fuming and raging, imagining for some reason or another I had deceived her. I knew in one point I had been wrong, but I had slipped down the first step of false doing, and my pride would not allow me to confess it. I little foresaw what an abyss that one false move would precipitate me into. After a stormy visit, she took her leave, and as I opened the drawing-room door to let her pass, glad enough she was going she said to me, in a mocking, satirical way, "Have you any message for anyone at the Hall? I am going on there to luncheon."

"None," said I.

She answered with a curt, derisive laugh, and left the room.

Things seemed conspiring against me. I felt disposed to take the first train and go home, but mother was a very martinet as to the proprieties, and for me to leave Aunt Mary's house without her sanction, and travel alone to my dear smoky home, would have been an unpardonable offence, so I sat down to my solitary lunch, feeling as if each morsel would choke me. In the afternoon I took up my pencil, and solaced my spirit with drawing, one of the most soothing of accomplishments. About four o'clock, just as I was looking forward to my cup of tea, John came in, and in a highly confidential manner informed me Sir Charles Wynton had called, and wished to see me.

CHAPTER VII.

"Though this be madness, yet there's method in it.

– *Hamlet*, Act II.

SHOULD I go? I did not see what else I could do, and therefore obeyed the summons unwillingly. He was standing with his back to the fire, dressed with scrupulous care and neatness, and looked every inch a gentleman. He came forward to meet me, with a good deal of nervousness in his manner. Indeed, I am sure he was as nervous as myself.

The usual platitudes passed, and then there was an awkward pause. He was the first to break it.

"Alice"—and coming towards me, he took a chair, and seated himself close by, endeavouring to take my unwilling hand, "Alice, I have come to-day, to hear from your lips that you will make me a happy man."

No answer. A lump came up in my throat; I

could not speak. A demoniac voice kept saying, "Tell him, tell him everything." Tears came to my relief, and I sobbed quietly. He disengaged my hand, with a vexed look, and said, "Now this is hard upon a fellow, after so long an interval, in which I have cherished hope."

"You had better take care what Dr. Leslie said to you," repeated the demon voice; "take care, take care." I struggled with myself. "Sir Charles, I have a great deal I should like to tell you."

"I am all attention," he replied. "What is it? Is it about money? I have more than is sufficient," and he tried to coax me.

"It is not about money. It is something about yourself."

"Myself?"

"Yes. I want to ask you a question. I dare say you will not like it, but I cannot help that."

He made no answer; such a dark expression came over his handsome debonair face—evil even. I saw the latent demon then. "Will you tell me if you know that your late wife haunts this house? And if you do know it, is it because you were cruel, cold, and neglectful of her? Is it true what people say," I blindly continued, "that you were the indirect cause of her death? And if these things are so, can I be expected to place myself in the same position, and probably share the same fate?"

He rose suddenly from the chair with a gesture

of impatience, and taking his former position in front of the fire, with a face of ashy whiteness, said, "Pray go on, Miss White."

"I have nothing more to say, except that until these mysteries are thoroughly and satisfactorily explained, I cannot consent to be your wife. Aunt Mary is in possession of a secret intended for you, which your late wife confided to her on her death-bed. You have never yet received this message."

"Fool, fool, fool," shrieked the demon voices in my ear; still I plunged madly on—"If you do not believe what I say, sit up all night in this haunted house. You will be charmed with music, and horrified with an apparition of the late Lady Wynton." I looked up at him. He stood as if he were stone, still and pale even to the very lips. The intense blue of his eyes seemed to have become fainter in colour, and the expression on his face was greatly changed. At length, to my relief he replied—better anything than such a protracted silence. I felt I had madly made the plunge, and could bear any consequences that might arise.

"Miss White," he said, "I consider you have cruelly maligned me. Assuming on the modern notion that a pretty girl may say anything she likes, however it may wound another's feelings, and expect to be forgiven, you have tried the experiment with me. How can you bring to my notice the ill-natured scandals of envious people and the ridiculous superstitions of the ignorant?

These stories are simply brought up to annoy me; they are *not* the reasons of your hesitation in accepting my offer."

"I assure you," I commenced——

"No," he said, putting out his hand towards me in a warning manner, "nothing of the sort; they are only the prologue to the play. You liked Mr. Peel, and the delay in accepting my offer was to see whether he would make you one himself. Your tactics have failed miserably, and the man is in a delirium, from finding out, as he thought" (and he laughed sardonically) "that you loved me."

I rose to my feet; passion, rage, scorn, all uppermost in my mind. Who had done me this wrong? To whom was I indebted for so cruel an aspersion? Why had I to suffer this injustice? It was Ethel Wilkins, of course. Oh! envious woman, what will she not do where the happiness of a rival is at stake? Evidently she had in some way obtained an inkling that Sir Charles had proposed, or was going to propose to me; and as it was the intention of her family, as I knew, he should marry none but her, she had gone in her wary, diplomatic manner, and dropped, as if by accident, the chilling poison of suspicion into his ear. Every circumstance of the delay pointed and gave colour to the apparent truth of her fabrication. As regards myself, indeed, it was a very pretty story, and only needed the fact

that Mr. Peel did see me that evening in the Rectory library, to come out, to entangle me in the meshes of an ill-founded, spiteful piece of scandal.

Before I had quite made up my mind what answer I would give him, Aunt Mary entered. She appeared surprised at finding Sir Charles there, and made a feint of retiring, but he rapidly advanced to meet her, and handed her a chair close to the fire.

"Miss Lascelles," he said, "your niece and I have been having a few words. She has been kind enough to convey to me several most unpleasant reports regarding the manner I behaved to my late wife, which are circulated by scandal-mongers. I also understand you are in possession of a secret which it is quite your business to confide to me, together with several other unpleasant circumstances, which, no doubt, you are aware of." Here he waited to see what Aunt Mary would say. However, she made no reply, nor did she even raise her eyes from the fire.

"Pretty girls," he continued, turning to me, "can, I suppose, think they may say what they like, never mind how much they wound or annoy others. They should also be held to their promises as regards marriage. I consider the delay you asked for in giving me a definite answer, as tantamount to an acceptance. If you

had no intention whatever, why not have said so at once?"

Ah! indeed, why had I not? but foolishly vacillating, I had gathered these complications around me.

"Aunt Mary," I cried, "I never promised to accept this offer. Will you not believe me?" She made no reply, and he continued—

"Miss Lascelles, you will see with me, that the knowledge that your niece has of my affairs, makes it all the more necessary that our interests should be one; and that at no very distant period. Had I not fully believed she would be firm to the promise she appeared to make to me in the Walnut Avenue, I should have let Burnham, and gone abroad again for some years. I leave it to you to see that she is brought to reason, and that the marriage takes place."

"What!" I exclaimed, "when I absolutely refuse your offer? Aunt Mary, do say something; tell him I never will marry him."

"Child," she replied in a short testy manner, "you are foolish and silly, and have mentioned matters you were absolutely forbidden to refer to. The consequences must be on your own head."

Sir Charles Wynton moved near to the door, and stood looking at us, as if we were figures in a drama that was being enacted for his benefit. The lamps were not lit, and the firelight was flickering and dancing, sometimes illuminating Aunt Mary's

pale, sad face; at others, falling on me. A few moments passed in silence, then he opened the door and went out without any further recognition of either of us. Aunt Mary made no remark, nor did she even lift her head. I stood near the gipsy table, in an undecided, petrified kind of way. At last she rang the bell. It was answered by Sylvester, gorgeous in black silk and white cap. Aunt looked up as she entered, and said in low subdued tones, "Sylvester, she has told him." With what malignity and hatred did the woman look at me, as she replied, "Indeed, ma'am." What more they were going to do or say, I did not intend to remain to hear or see; so, without another word, I left the room. My limbs trembled with agitation, and my pulses beat at a tremendous pace. Passing through the hall, with its beautiful carved oak furniture, I took up a shawl that was on one of the chairs, and wrapping it around my shoulders, went out through the front door—frenzied, purposeless. It was a very wet night, and dark, the black and white masses of clouds were scudding quickly across the stormy sky, whilst the silvery moon endeavoured to penetrate some of the dark masses. The rain fell heavily, and soon soaked me through. The mental excitement I was labouring under lifted me far above any consciousness of physical discomfort. A sense of injustice, mystery, and scorn burned into my very soul.

I had only one idea uppermost in my mind, and this in a concentrated form, to the exclusion of all others, that in a young, vigorous, and highly vitalized temperament amounted to monomania.

I thought to seek relief in suicide. I walked on to the mere; the water looked smooth and glassy, and reflected the splendid masses of clouds —it was even enticing; but the plunge! Ah, that was the thing my young, full pulse recoiled from. The moon at this moment burst out, brilliantly, from behind a very dark cloud, and I seemed to gain strength and comfort from it. Sweet moonlight! it was thou that saved'st me! Gradually, my reasoning powers returned, and although I wandered hopelessly and purposelessly amongst the dripping, leafless trees, I had the normal and natural instinct of clinging to life.

To Woodlands I dared not return at the present; but as my reason strengthened, I comforted myself with the assurance that, in a few hours, I would go quietly back, and let myself in by the garden door. I would beg to be allowed to go home to Manchester next day, and love and lovers should ever be things of the past. Shivering with cold, and wet to the skin, for I commenced to be aware of physical discomfort, I sat down near a clump of trees to wait until it got a little later. I fancied I heard wheels coming down the road, and as I was not very far from it, I crouched down in my shawl, hiding my face, that no one

should see me. I heard the wheels stop, and then footsteps. Alas! they were approaching me. Suddenly, my arm was roughly seized, and the voice of a man said, "Here she is; we have got her now."

"Bring her along," called out another voice, which I recognised to be that of Sylvester. "She won't get away again."

"Oh!" I cried, "do leave me alone. Leave me alone. I will not go with you."

No answer was vouchsafed to this entreaty; but the man forced me into the brougham, and banged the door. I soon found myself driven along at a rapid pace, with Sylvester by my side.

We proceeded for some time in silence, then instead of taking the turning to Woodlands, I found we were going on to Oakford, and soon lights from the scattered villas leading into the town confirmed my observation.

I felt so thoroughly annoyed with Sylvester, I would not condescend to ask a single question, and we soon drew up before the handsome door of Dr. Leslie's well-appointed house. We alighted, and, wondering what we were calling there for, I followed Sylvester into the consulting-room on the left-hand side of the door.

"Are we going to fetch some medicine for Aunt Mary?" I enquired, as I thought it would be as well to seek a solution.

"You will see Dr. Leslie in a few moments,

and you will be able to ascertain," was the rude reply, and she left the room.

I was alone. The hands of the timepiece pointed to nine. I could scarcely have believed it was so late! My excitement having cooled down, I began to feel that I was wet to the skin and chilled to the bone. My hair was soaked and dishevelled; I was untidy—unfit to be seen by such a particular and well-dressed man as Dr. Leslie. What would he think of me, and what had induced me to act in such a stupid, rash manner? Possibly he was out, and I should not see him at all. Evidently Sylvester had come on for medicine for Aunt Mary, and had gone into the surgery. She would return in a few moments, and we should go back to Woodlands. I remained waiting with great patience, endeavouring to revive warmth in my chilled limbs by the fire; still Sylvester did not come back.

Wearied with suspense I walked to the well-lined bookshelves, and taking down the first book that offered, "Holland's Mental Physiology," commenced turning over its pages till I came to the following passage:—"In some cases of hysteria, which border closely on mental derangement, there appear, as it were, two minds; one tending to correct by more just perceptions, feelings, and volitions the aberrations of the other, and the relative power of these influences varying at different times." Two minds! If so, why had I not obeyed the dictates of my better one, and acted

as Aunt Mary, Dr. Leslie, and everybody wished? Evidently the evil half of my nature was uppermost, strong, and the least under control. As I was replacing the book, which seemed to me dry, technical, and uninteresting, Dr. Leslie entered. He had evidently just come in from seeing a patient, and had not stopped to take off his top coat. Advancing towards me, with a certain amount of brusqueness in his manner, and without a vestige of a smile on his face, he led me away from the bookshelves to the fireside; then, stooping down, he stirred the coals into a blaze. From his manner I felt an innate conviction I had hopelessly and grievously offended him.

"Is it possible you are as wet as this? Good heavens!" he continued, as he almost wrung the water from my dress.

Ringing the bell, he ordered the housemaid to be sent; and on her appearance, told her to take me upstairs to the spare room, light a good fire there, give me something hot, and get me into bed at once; and feeling too glad at last of having the opportunity of getting warm, I followed her, although what she must have thought of the strangeness of my appearance, at such an hour and in such a plight, I did not remain to consider. Sylvester ought never to have acted in such a manner, and why she did so, I was at a loss to conceive. Some stupid mistake must have arisen which I should learn the next day. Just as I was

comfortably settled in bed, Mrs. Leslie came in to see how I was. She had been at a dinner party that evening, and made use of many expressions of regret that she had been out when I arrived; but that I ought not to have sat all that time in wet things; it was very foolish. I said I could not think what Sylvester meant by leaving me in such an unpardonable fashion; but Mrs. Leslie, after many beatings about the bush, informed me that my aunt had been so upset with the way I had acted, that it was considered better for me not to return to Woodlands that evening, and Sylvester had acted purposely.

Had Dr. Leslie seen Aunt Mary? I enquired.

"Yes; he went over this evening, and it was arranged you should remain here, and under the Doctor's charge for a time, just till things quiet down," replied Mrs. Leslie, in a motherly fashion, as she took my hand caressingly in her own.

"I had better go home," I said, as the tears welled up in my eyes, and a lump came in my throat.

"Not yet, I think," replied Mrs. Leslie. "Your aunt will be wanting you again in a few days; but you know she is very nervous and excitable; and I can assure you, you have raised a pretty 'to do,' as the servants say, at Woodlands and Burnham."

"Have I? Well I could not help it."

"Some day you will see you have been foolish.

Young people always think they are going to correct the faults of everyone about them, not knowing that 'discretion is the better part of valour.' But now let me tuck you up, and try and go to sleep." So saying she left me to myself and my own reflections.

The next morning, after breakfast, as I was sitting listlessly in the dining-room, reading the morning's paper, whilst Mrs. Leslie was looking after her household affairs, her husband entered, and taking a seat near me, commenced by asking, in a kind and sympathetic tone, if I felt better.

"I did not know I was ill," I said smiling at the suggestion.

"Not ill! with a pulse at 93°, and walking out by Burnham Mere, bare-headed, after dark, in a soaking rain. Oh! Miss White, you have broken all your promises to me, and done exactly what I requested you not to do. Surely you could have exercised greater control over your feelings than to behave as you did?"

"I could not the least help it. Desperate cases sometimes require desperate remedies."

He muttered an expression of impatience; and, rising from his chair, continued—

"Well, all I can say is, you have annoyed your kind, good aunt beyond measure, and really one has doubts of your sanity."

"Dr. Leslie! After being three months in a haunted house!"

"Tut, tut, child. I have told you these things can be scientifically explained, but I am not intending to enter into abstruse ranges of argument with you at present; sufficient to say it will be as well for you to have a change of air, for a week or two, until your aunt's anger is blown over."

"I am going home then?"

"On the contrary, a most emphatic promise was made by your mother to Miss Lascelles, that you should remain with her for the winter. You will only be away at the place I am going to send you to, a fortnight or three weeks. You will have a charming companion in the shape of a most amiable lady, who is a great friend of mine, and who will probably give you some idea of one qualification of the human mind, to which you seem an utter stranger—and that is, obedience."

I made no reply, but rising from my seat, hastened towards the morning-room, in the hopes of obtaining some information as to my ultimate destination from Mrs. Leslie. She was busily engaged looking over tradesmen's books, and nothing could I get out of her in answer to my enquiries, except that I should be going to a very pretty part of the country, and that the lady who was to accompany me was decidedly, what people call, a "nice woman." I suggested that my usually robust and exuberant health did not call for any remedy of the kind; and that Woodlands was quite sufficiently in the country to render it

superfluous, that I should go into any other country place for change.

Mrs. Leslie told me that Sylvester had packed a small trunk with the necessary things I should require, and it had already been sent over, and that the arrangement was, I should leave Oakford, for Netfold, by the afternoon train. Miss Rhodes, the lady with whom I was going, would be at the railway station, and we were to travel down together.

A nice little plan, I thought, and very quickly formed; but at all events there were the elements of unknown regions, to excite and amuse my mind. I thought I should very much like to call at the Rectory before leaving, and if possible see Ethel —the snake in the grass, who had endeavoured to destroy my happiness—full well was I convinced it was from her, alone, that Sir Charles had heard about Mr. Peel, and my apparent deceit.

However, the opportunity did not arrive, as there were so many minor details to be looked after, and at about three o'clock that afternoon I found myself at Oakford Railway Station, under the charge of a lady, by name Rhodes. She was between thirty-five and forty, petite, dark, and with a great deal of natural vivacity and briskness. I felt desponding and ill at ease, and little inclined to share in her apparent exuberance of spirits. She said that she knew Dr. Leslie very well, and seemed to have a sincere admiration for his intel-

lectual gifts, and powers of discrimination. After an uneventful sort of journey, we arrived at the thriving market town of Netfold, and were met on the platform of the railway station by a man in a very shabby sort of livery, a compromise between a groom and coachman, who, touching his hat, informed Miss Rhodes the fly was waiting outside. Our luggage was got out and we started for Witton Hall, the name of our destination.

It was a cold, dark evening, and one could obtain no view of the surrounding country as we drove along, but it seemed to me dreary, and the way immensely long. "The Hall" was quite five miles from Netfold, and at last the clumsy old-fashioned vehicle turned from the main road, down a long narrow lane, with a steep descent. Trees were thickly planted each side of the hedges, and stretched out their bare wintry branches overhead. Drawing up at a small iron gate we descended, and traversed a gravel path which led through a large and well-kept garden. The front door, which was of an old-fashioned rustic pattern, was held open by an old woman, who had a flickering candle in the other hand, and who seemed to welcome Miss Rhodes with cordiality. Following her down a long narrow passage we came into a large room very low pitched, and meagrely furnished in farmhouse style. A good fire was burning in the grate, which made it appear more comfortable, and I gladly drew a chair towards the blaze and

warmed my benumbed limbs, whilst Miss Rhodes bustled about, making different little preparations for the meal, dinner or tea, which was spread on the table. Before partaking of it she requested me to come up stairs with her to see our rooms, and I followed with some little curiosity up an old-fashioned creaking oaken staircase, and along narrow passages, the walls of which were all wainscotted in oak ; the place looked weird and grim enough, added to which there was the most intense draught from the ill-fitting doors and windows. Going down two steps we came to a large bedroom, plainly furnished, but tolerably comfortable, and very clean. Passing through this room there was another, furnished much in the same way, but all panelled in oak, and with a frieze of carved oak heads, life size, which grinned and leered at me in a truly frightful manner—there was a king, with his crown on, and a queen, slaves, warriors, exultant fiends, all carved in the most finished style. Miss Rhodes informed me this was to be my bedroom. "You will not be afraid of these carvings," she enquired, "they are considered very fine, in fact quite *chef d'œuvres;* it seems a pity the art is lost."

"No, I think not," was my answer. "I suppose the room is not haunted?"

"Haunted? oh! the idea," laughed Miss Rhodes, with an attempt to be funny. "We are all too much advanced for such beliefs. Come now, if

you will get your things off we will have something to eat. I am sure you must be hungry."

When I went down, and we commenced tea, I said, "This is not my idea of a Hall, ancient and baronial; it has all the appointments of a farmhouse."

"Oh!" she replied, rather curtly, "in many counties farmhouses are called Halls. Originally this has been some Manor House, as you can see by the oak carvings and panelling, but has changed hands, become mortgaged, and sunk into decay, ending, as you see it, as a mere farmhouse."

At this moment, the old woman who had received us, came in with a dish of ham, and casting very inquisitive glances at me left the room chuckling. "What is she laughing at?" I asked when she closed the door.

"I suppose it is a rare thing for her to see a new face in this remote region," said Miss Rhodes, pouring out another cup of tea.

"Are you far from houses?" I enquired.

"There are none nearer than a mile."

"Where is the village, then?"

"Four cottages, a rectory house, and a church comprise the village; and they are all a mile off."

"What a very strange idea of Dr. Leslie to wish me to come here for a change!"

"You will have an opportunity for absolute vegetation; and there is nothing gives such entire rest to an over-worked mind. It is the post,

telegrams, telephones, visiting—in fact the pressure of civilisation that induces so many of the modern illnesses."

"Oh! well, I'm not ill,—still I am very willing to keep you company in this isolated place, and possibly we may have some adventures to relate when our visit is at an end."

"Possibly we may," was the reply, but Miss Rhodes never smiled, or even looked up.

"Are there no servants here?" was my next question.

"Oh dear no! Everything is quite primitive. The old woman you have seen will wait upon us, and cook and clean; her husband is a bailiff on the farm, but he is very deaf and getting infirm, so we shall be pretty much to ourselves."

"Has Dr. Leslie ever been here?"

"Occasionally, when a very important 'case' is sent for change."

"Case?" interrogatively.

"Yes, psychological, of course."

"Oh!" I subsided into silence, and remained some time in a deep reverie. Certainly this appeared to me to be the commencement of one of the most strange epochs in my life. Why had I been sent here in company with Miss Rhodes? Was it possible that Dr. Leslie looked upon me as a "case," and that a psychological one? Yet, it was one of the very strangest modes of cure to place one in such a place. Where should I find

the companionship of healthy minds that he had once spoken to me about, as an important factor in nervous cures? In the chuckling old woman, deaf farm bailiff, or Miss Rhodes? Time would no doubt show. It was all very strange, and even unreal to me.

The next morning rose brightly, the winter sun gilding the landscape, which I saw from my window, was diversified and undulating; not a house to be seen anywhere, nothing but stretches of green fields, for it appeared to be chiefly pasture land about, and a great many fine old trees scattered at intervals.

After breakfast, I took my hat and walked round the place exploring. The farm buildings were to one side of the house, and very large. It appeared to me that they were almost empty, for they had a neglected tenantless air. A number of fowls were running about, and a large collie dog was chained to a kennel close to the dairy door. Peeping in, I saw the "chuckling" old woman very busily and actively engaged churning. I remained watching her with some interest for several moments, and at last volunteered to commence a conversation.

"You must be dull here, I should think?"

"Nay, I never feel so," was the reply.

"Does no one live anywhere near?"

"There's Bright's people down at the mill cottage, but they doant often come up 'ere."

"Are there no gentry about?"

"Not that I've 'eard on, 'cept the Rector, an' the great folks at Workington, but that is eight miles off."

"Miss Rhodes has been here before?" I enquired, wishing to see what she would say.

She looked up at me, with that chuckle on her face to which I so greatly objected, and turning the churn handle with undoubted vigour, replied in a hesitating sort of way—

"Yes, miss! With what she calls 'cases,' what I calls crazy folks—there was one on 'em 'ere, fancied I was Apoller, or some furrin gentleman of that name, an' was always a wantin' to kiss me."

I smiled. It must indeed have been a "case," for any one more unlike the furrin gentleman than she was would have been impossible to find.

"Was she here long?"

"Nay. The change didn't suit 'er, so Dr. Leslie came down to see, and they sent 'er to Germany, or some place over the water. My word! she did 'ave tantrums if Miss Rhodes crossed 'er! Bless yer, she would smash anything she could find."

"What did she do when the lady acted in such a way?"

"Lor' bless yer! she used this 'ere scientifick treatment, an' used to read potry to keep 'er quiet. My old man said he would just 'ave given 'er a taste of his fists. Readin' potry, indeed!"

I was going to respond, when I saw Miss Rhodes'

trim little figure and dark eyes flash in the doorway; she cast a very suspicious look at the old woman, who immediately sunk into her usual shell of reserve, and churned as if for life.

"Are you not coming out for a walk with me this morning? I have been waiting for you some time. I did not know you were here. I want to show you the village, and Post Office, and if the churchyard is open, we can go in and look at that."

I ran up to get my jacket, and we started. As we were walking up the long lane that led to the outer world, Miss Rhodes informed me as to the manner she had arranged we should employ our days, so that the fortnight or three weeks might easily pass over. Walking in the morning, reading in the afternoon, working and chatting in the evening.

CHAPTER VIII.

"There is a very life in our despair—
Vitality of poison—a quick root
Which feeds these deadly branches ; for it were
As nothing did we die : but life will suit
Itself to sorrow's most detested fruit."

—*Childe Harold.*

THE "Post Office" was at one of the four cottages comprising the village street, and the letters were taken round once a day, in the morning, by a woman who thought nothing of tramping five or six miles in snow or rain to deliver them at the different farmhouses and outlying cottages. The Rectory seemed a good house, and stood away from the road, in large grounds. The church was small, but prettily situated, and commanded a very extensive view. The Rector was an old bachelor, a great antiquarian, and a man who cared but little for society. There were the usual country services, twice every Sunday, when the school children

shouted hymns at the top of their voices, and the Rector droned out the prayers and a short sermon. In the evening, when we were seated over our work and chatting, I found that Miss Rhodes was certainly clever for a person who had received no legal training, in asking leading questions. She was very anxious to get all the information she could from me concerning Woodlands, to gauge how much I knew of the existing mysteries there, and of how much I was in ignorance. I had sufficient acumen to detect that they imagined I knew the secret that had been confided to my aunt by Lady Wynton.

Assuming that Sir Charles and Dr. Leslie had a very good idea of what it was, then I became a dangerous person, but in this case, like all people who fancy they are very clever, they had greatly over-reached themselves. Indeed, it seemed a farce that they should have taken up such a position as regards myself, but there was no doubt I had blundered.

A week passed by, and our solitary life continued. I had written to my mother, Aunt Mary, and Dr. Leslie, but strange to say had not yet received a single answer. The letters were dispatched in a locked leathern bag, every evening at five o'clock by the farm boy, who took them up to the post. It was hardly likely he would tamper with them, as there was nothing in the least that could interest or amuse him. Miss Rhodes always fastened up

the letter bag herself, and kept the key. I made up my mind that if no answer came to any of my communications, I would in future post all letters myself at the cottage. The silence from those at home, the undeviating amiability of Miss Rhodes, was rather exasperating. I felt I was the victim of a conspiracy, yet had nothing tangible I could complain about with any show of reason. I was neither ill-treated nor starved, and the ostensible reason given for my isolation seemed natural enough; but with all this there was no doubt in my mind but that a special object was in view in sending me to Witton. What that was remained to be proved. I found at night, as a matter of fact, I was a complete prisoner, as I must pass through Miss Rhodes' bedroom to get out, and she always locked her door and removed the key. When I mentioned the fact of this removal to her she was at once ready with a plausible excuse, pleading nervousness at being alone in this weird old place.

No answer came to my letters. The easiest course seemed to me to be to go up to the village and post them; then, at least, I should be sure they had reached their destination safely.

Little did I guess that the post woman had been instructed by Miss Rhodes beforehand, and that they were returned privately to her at Witton Hall for their legitimate transit, that was the leathern "letter bag."

However, where ignorance is bliss it is folly

indeed to be wise; and I walked home with a light heart, after having deposited all my communications in a safe place. I made up my mind that if no answer was received to these letters I would set my mind at work to effect my escape—not so easy a matter as my readers may imagine; six miles from a railway station, and no means of getting there except to walk, when I should be so long away from my constant companion that I should be missed, or to ride in a carrier's cart which left the "village" at nine in the morning, and did the five miles something under three hours, calling at houses and cottages by the way for commissions, and having, as the rustic carrier expressed it, "a gaff with one, and a gaff with another." (Gaff, meaning "chat, badinage, or repartee.") There was not such a thing as a cab, or fly, except at Netfold, and it would have to be ordered a day before and sent over to fetch me. Impossible to entertain any idea of the kind without instant detection following.

A few more days passed and still no letters. I now made up my mind I would make the best of my way home to Manchester. I felt an indescribable sort of fear at my surroundings, together with the even amiability of my gaoler, Miss Rhodes. I knew instinctively it would be useless to express openly my wish or determination to return home. I should be met with every kind of excuse and subterfuge.

Netfold railway station was the nearest, besides being the most direct route to Manchester. I thought walking would take me too long, as I probably might be missed before reaching my destination, and the only mode of transit I could avail myself of was the carrier's cart—not a very dignified one, but better than nothing. I knew Miss Rhodes would be some time before she missed me, as she had been suffering from a cold, and had her breakfast taken up to her the last few mornings, not coming down much before eleven; during which time I used to wander about the desolate garden and farmyard.

Next morning, after a disturbed and restless night, I rose early; and dressing hastily and very quietly, so as not to disturb Miss Rhodes' slumbers, I passed through her room, having taken care to abstract the key the previous evening. Carrying my hat and jacket under my arm, I crept softly down stairs, and, opening the rustic front door, was soon walking up the long lane which led to the outer world, with all the speed I could muster. I had taken care to fill my purse with necessary money for my journey, and looking at my watch found it was just a quarter of an hour to the time the carrier was supposed to leave Witton for Netfold. It was a clear bright winter's morning, but very cold, and the frost glistened like diamonds on the hedgerows and grassy banks.

After a great deal of what seemed to me useless

preliminaries and minute arrangement of details, without any method or organisation, the fussy little carrier got ready and we started. Never shall I forget the delays on that journey; it would have been far better for me to have walked, for I was young and strong, and a six mile walk was of no particular moment. The stopping at every cottage; the searching for packages which should have been at the top, and were six layers deep at the bottom of the cart; the chatting, gossipping, laughing with customers, and the complete disregard of time being of any value, was simply maddening to an escaped prisoner; for such I considered myself. However, all things must come to an end, and in due time we drew up at the railway station, where the carrier had some parcels to deliver. Gladly alighting, I paid him his very moderate charge and passed through into the booking office; meeting a porter on my way I inquired of him the time that the next train for Manchester left, and to my chagrin he told me there was not another till 3.15. It was now nearly half-past one, there was nothing for it but to wait, so getting some sandwiches at the refreshment room, I went into the ladies' waiting room to sit down and eat them. Every few minutes seemed an hour; two at last struck and I seemed a little, very little, nearer to the time of departure. I tried to enter into conversation with the woman in charge

of the waiting room, but she was inclined to be taciturn and glum. Wearying with impatience, I thought I would go out to the bookstall and buy a paper, which might help to divert my thoughts until it was time to take my ticket. Having invested in the *Daily News*, and turned to go back to the waiting room, I saw approaching with rapid steps, the sharp quick little form of Miss Rhodes. My first impulse was to throw myself on to the metals, but I had no time to carry out any project of escape before she was close up to me.

"Oh, Alice, you have given me a fright! I thought something must have happened to you, and have been so uneasy."

"What should happen to me?" I replied, with as much show of indifference as I could put on. "I am going home by the 3.15 train."

"Home!" she replied. "What, without luggage or writing to give any notice? What would your mother think? Just as if you were escaping from gaol."

"It is only exactly what I am doing."

"You ungrateful girl! When I am doing all I can to make your stay agreeable and pleasant at Witton. Come, now," she added, assuming an authoritative air, "this is all nonsense and waste of time; you cannot go to-day. Come with me, I want to do a little shopping in Netfold, and then we will take a fly and drive home."

Home! What a parody on the sacred word was Witton Hall and its attendants. Oh, if the train had been only an hour earlier! I could have so easily got away. Fate, malignant fate, had pursued me. I sat down on the nearest bench, saying as I did so, "Miss Rhodes, I will never leave this station until I am in the Manchester train."

She seated herself close to me, and although she watched me like a cat, made no further remark.

I also kept silence till, seeing it was time to take my ticket, I rose and went towards the booking office. She followed me closely, and as I was going up to the pigeon-hole, took hold of my arm in an eager, excited way, saying, "Alice, one word. I do not want to make a scene, but if you attempt to take a ticket for Manchester I shall forbid the clerk to give it you."

"On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that you are under my complete control and charge, and that I forbid you to leave Netfold."

"You will do such a thing?"

"I shall. I am responsible to Dr. Leslie for you; young ladies must not travel alone, at a late hour, in railway carriages. See, it will soon be dark."

I hesitated. I was very proud, and the ignominy of her proceeding in such a way

struck me painfully. I thought a few moments, then said—

"There are other times when I can effect my purpose, and if I consent to go *home* with you it will only be temporising. Why do I get no letters from home?"

"My child," she exclaimed, "there are actually two waiting for you at Witton. They must have come this morning after you left."

Two letters! Then I would indeed return quietly, just to see what they were about, and to prevent them falling into her hands; so yielding to her direction, we passed out of the station, and were soon in the streets of Netfold. Miss Rhodes went into one or two shops and made purchases, keeping a keen eye on my movements during the time; then we went down the hill to the chief hotel in the place, and ordered a fly to be got ready to take us to Witton in an hour. Going into a private room, she ordered dinner for two, and writing materials to be brought. Whilst she sat down to write some letters, I amused myself by watching the passers-by from the window, as well as I could see in the fast waning light. The noise and bustle of the streets seemed to cheer me, and infuse life and spirit, and I began to think the country was very dreary and dismal in winter time.

After dinner, we started in a lumbering old-fashioned fly, and had a long silent drive to Witton Hall, for Miss Rhodes seemed intensely annoyed

with me. I never felt more like an escaped convict, taken and chained, in my life, and was mentally undecided whether I had acted with cowardice. What if I had dared her to do her worst, taken my ticket, and jumped into the train, as soon as it steamed up to the platform? Supposing she had acted as she threatened, and made a scene, what an ignominy for me! My heart sank with an aching void as I entered the cold, draughty, comfortless hall, and I flung myself in a despairing manner into an easy chair by the sitting-room fire. Here I was, no further than when I set out this morning, my plans foiled and utterly frustrated.

When Miss Rhodes entered, from settling with old Jubal, the fly man, I eagerly asked for my letters, which I did not see on the mantelpiece, where they ought to have been put. I thought she changed colour, and saying she would bring them down after she had taken off her things, she left me to my own reflections for at least half an hour. I began to get impatient, so rang the bell.

It was answered by Mrs. Gore, the chuckling old woman.

"Where are my letters—those that came for me this morning after I left?" I enquired.

She made no immediate reply, but closing the door very carefully, and producing a short-handled brush, came towards the fire, and kneeling down, commenced to sweep the hearth: then looking

again towards the door, to see if it was safely shut, said in a hoarse whisper—

"If any did come—but I didn't see 'em. She," pointing upstairs with her finger, in a melodramatic way, "she's got 'em."

I was indignant. "Go and ask her for them," I replied. "Say I've been waiting some time, and am impatient. What can she be doing all this time?"

She rose from her knees, and making a feint of dusting the mantelpiece, said—

"I durstn't, miss. There is someone come to see 'er on business, an' they are talkin' in the front kitchen."

"Who is it?"

"Nay, I can't tell, I only 'ears voices."

"I'll go myself," said I, and rising from my seat with a bound of impatience, went down the narrow, draughty, dark passage, to the door of the front kitchen. Lifting the latch, I entered. The room was not lighted save by the fire. Large hams were suspended from the ceiling, and the furniture was of the ordinary kind seen in farmhouses. As I entered, someone hastily rose, and left the room, by the door opening to the dairy. It was a man, and that man was Sir Charles Wynton!

It seemed impossible I could have been mistaken!

Miss Rhodes quickly rose from the seat she was occupying beside the fire; the other chair was

vacant. Coming towards me, she said in a rude, hectoring way—

"What do you want? What do you mean by coming into this part of the house?"

"I came for the letters you said you had of mine. Who was that, that left the room directly I came in?"

She thought a moment or two, then replied in her usual suave manner—

"Was there anyone? Oh! yes, Mr. Gore, the bailiff; he has been consulting the barometer, to see if we shall have rain to-morrow; but go into the sitting-room, and wait till I come."

And she half pushed me from the doorway. I returned and remained as quiet as I could for some time, till my patience was nearly exhausted. At last she came in, and taking up her work, sat down.

"Miss Rhodes," I asked, "the letters?"

"To tell you the truth, Alice, I made a mistake, there were none. I am really very sorry you have been disappointed."

"Oh! what a shame, and it was only for those I returned, or I should have persisted in going home."

"Well, I made a mistake," she answered coldly, examining her stitches with a critical air.

My blood simmered, for that was the only way of expressing the state that disappointment, rage, at being frustrated in my plans, and the astonish-

ment that Sir Charles was in the neighbourhood, if not in the house at the present moment, had caused. Until that moment I never knew what I was capable of when brought to bay. Naturally nervous and hysterical, I could always be soothed and quieted by kindness and open dealing, but when driven to a corner, without any chance of escape, I could spring, and when my blood reached boiling point, I did.

I felt my head swelling almost to bursting, and an unnatural physical strength animated all my muscles.

Rising from my seat, I took the cheap flimsy ornaments from the mantelpiece, and flinging them to the ground, smashed them into a thousand pieces.

To my astonishment Miss Rhodes did not even look up from her work, but went calmly on, criticising her stitches. I cannot exactly say whether this assumed indifference—for such it must have been—irritated me more. I wanted to make a sensation ; excitement of some kind I must have ; still I felt it ignominious to draw her attention to the damage I had done. It was annoying not even to cause surprise by such an action. Whilst I was cogitating what the next move should be, the door was opened, and the chuckling old woman appeared, dustpan and broom in hand, and, kneeling down, set to work to sweep up the *débris* of the china. She must have heard

the smash, as I did not notice Miss Rhodes ring the bell. Whilst she was sweeping, the latter looked up, and quietly remarked, "Mrs. Gore, two shillings will replace this."

Two shillings! Was that all the ornaments were worth?

My passionate action was met with this calm indifference, by the worthlessness of the damage done. It might be interesting to see if one could excite these two extraordinary persons, so I went towards the casement window to smash a pane. Quick as thought Miss Rhodes perceived my intention, and seized my hands, but I was younger and stronger, and, wrestling for a moment, accomplished my purpose. The old woman stood by, dustpan in hand, waiting with some eagerness to sweep up those fragments that fell inside. She evidently seemed to think it was part of the programme when a "case" was at Witton. It was ludicrous, and I could not help laughing, but not a smile did I elicit from either of them. Miss Rhodes crossed to the fireplace and rang the bell. In a few moments Mr. Gore, the farm bailiff, stood in the doorway. He was evidently waiting for some orders. As soon as Miss Rhodes could suppress her passion sufficiently to speak, she said, in a loud voice, pointing to me, "Mr. Gore, carry this young lady upstairs to her room."

"Man!" I almost shrieked, "I dare you to touch me."

"Will you walk, then?" enquired Miss Rhodes.

"No! I will not move from here."

"Then you must suffer the ignominy of being carried."

"Never!" I replied. "If any one of you touch me, or use any coercion, I will have you all up before the magistrates. Oh! you are behaving shamefully, cruelly to me." And at this point my sobs and rage and wounded vanity choked my utterance.

"Alice, you are absurd to talk in such a way! It is you that are behaving disgracefully. I am doing all I can to make you happy and comfortable—but really your conduct is outrageous."

"I will not stay here any longer—I will go to the Rectory. At least Mr. Bridport will have some humanity. Yes, I will go," I reiterated, "and at once, and you can remain to plot with Sir Charles Wynton and Dr. Leslie."

"Alice!"

"Yes," turning to the astonished Mr. Gore who still remained gaping in the doorway. "Hasn't Sir Charles Wynton been here this evening?"

Before he could make any reply, Miss Rhodes waved her hand, saying, "That will do, Mr. Gore; you can go now, and if I want you I will ring."

He obeyed, and the old woman followed rather sheepishly, evidently thinking there was an end to the fun. After all, the wild passion of a goaded or nervous patient was the only change of scene or amusement she had.

"Now, Alice," said Miss Rhodes, when we were alone, "we have had quite enough temper to-day. Go before me to your bedroom—you must be thoroughly tired and ill."

Feeling I had been foolish, and seeing no other way out of it, I obeyed. There was a fire in the old fashioned grate, and on the table a tray with sandwiches and wine. Pressing me to make myself comfortable, take refreshment, and afterwards get to bed quietly, she left the room. That she was offended, possibly surprised at so new a procedure as smashing glass, on the part of a "sane" case, did not much astonish me. The difficulty that existed in my mind now, was, how I should act? That I was either the victim of a gross misunderstanding or a conspiracy was too palpably evident.

Miss Rhodes' promise of home letters was evidently a mere ruse to get me to return quietly with her from Netfold to Witton Hall. The subterfuge aroused my deepest scorn for the inventor. Naturally I lost respect, and confidence. To get home, and that shortly, was the leading and persistent idea in my mind.

Write to my mother? Had I not done so three or four times since I had been at Witton, but certainly had received no answer. Supposing there was any foul play with the letters posted at Witton. Then it would be a matter of necessity either to post them myself, or to get some one else

to do it for me at Netfold. There was no post-office that I knew of after Witton nearer than Netfold. Workington was almost as far as the latter place, in a contrary direction. To-morrow I would go up to the Rectory, "unbeknownt," as the chuckling old woman would say; demand an audience of Mr. Bridport, the eccentric rector, and seek his advice. With the sanguine characteristic of youth, I mapped out he would receive me with enthusiasm, willingly hear my tale, and send me home either with an escort, or take me himself. Gaining confidence after nursing this idea, I took my supper with a relish. The wine revived my flagging and exhausted energies. All would come right, and I should have shown everybody, Miss Rhodes and Dr. Leslie included, that I was a girl of spirit. Certainly it was rather strange, having seen Sir Charles Wynton rushing through the dairy door when I unexpectedly entered the front kitchen. But, after all, people said I was imaginative. I might have been mistaken.

Miss Rhodes said it was Gore, the farm bailiff—two very dissimilar men! Still imagination may do a great deal. Revolving all these things in my mind I undressed slowly, revelling in the warm glow of the fire, which even made the weird carved oak heads all round my room look attractive. At all events, they ceased nodding at me, which they were apt to do in a dim uncertain light.

Putting on a warm dressing gown, I waited for Miss Rhodes' coming up to bed. As her room opened out of mine, I naturally sat up for her, feeling that possibly I had behaved in a foolish manner, and had hardly merited the blazing fire and good supper, her forethought had provided for me.

Twelve o'clock—what could she be doing? Not supping in the room, with the broken window, and a north-east wind blowing in upon her? I thought I would just go outside the landing, taking no light with me, for fear of exciting observation, and see whether she was coming.

Suiting the action to the thought, I quietly crept along through her bedroom, and opening the door, went out, on to the cold draughty long landing, peering over the sides of the oaken balusters, to see if any lights downstairs could be perceived, or any sounds heard. All was still; that sort of silence that is oppressive, and a darkness that produces dyspnœa. I heard—no, it must have been fancy—yes, a footstep coming along the corridor—nothing could be seen, and I strained my eyes to look. The step approached nearer; something came up close to me, and placing a cold clammy hand on mine, said "Charlie!"

My feelings can be better imagined than written.

"I'm not Charlie," I replied. "Who are you?"

"It is I," was the only answer.

"Miss Rhodes?"

"No, Mary. Where's Charlie?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Miss Rhodes," I called out as loudly as I could. "Where are you? Bring a light here, please."

No answer, only dead silence and deep darkness, and the creature—was it spirit or woman? held so tight a grip on my arm that I could not stir.

"Miss Rhodes, do come! come!"

No response. "You must go," I said, endeavouring to shake her off with all the strength I could muster.

"Where is Charlie?" she reiterated.

"You must go," I replied, with a feeling of despair at my situation.

It placed its clammy fingers near my throat. Now, thought I, my last hour is indeed come.

"Mrs. Gore," I screamed, "Mrs. Gore."

No sooner had I pronounced these words than the hateful presence let go its grip—yes, its deadly grip from my throat, and shuffled along the corridor. A few moments after, Miss Rhodes came running up, candle in hand.

"What's the matter?" she exclaimed in some alarm.

"Matter!" said I, sinking in a semi-faint on the landing.

"Dear, dear me!" said Miss Rhodes; "there seems always a scene with you; what is the matter now?"

I told her, and she laughed me to scorn. "All

imagination. What imaginative creatures girls are. Come, let me help you to your room. Well, there now," she said in a soothing manner, "you really are ill. Come, cheer up. Tell me all about it."

I did so, but she did not seem particularly to relish the story, and her suavity of manner actually paled a little when I came to the part of the creature's asking for "Charlie." I will, however, do her this justice, that she left no means undone to comfort and reassure my unstrung nerves, and stayed with me all night, but I noticed she took the precaution to double-lock and bolt our door. Lying awake for some time thinking, the thought struck me, could Charlie be Sir Charles Wynton? If so, who could this clammy-handed creature be who kept asking for him?

Next morning, as I went down stairs, I examined every door, along the dark oaken corridor, trying them as I went along. Three rooms were empty, but the door of the one at the furthest end was locked. I knocked three times, but no answer was vouchsafed, although I fancied I heard some movements or whispering within. Still I had learned not to trust my imagination too much. After breakfast, I watched my opportunity, and slipping away, unobserved, from my gaoler, went up to the Rectory to see Mr. Bridport, as I had previously determined. I had heard he

was eccentric, but I thought he would, at all events, have common sense enough to advise me how to act, and to listen to my tale. Arrived at the door of the house, I rang timidly, and after some moments, it was opened by a cross-grained looking elderly woman. She seemed very much surprised at my asking for the Rector, and saying she did not think he could possibly see me, as he was much engaged that morning, bade me follow her, and showed me into a very old fashioned furnished drawing-room, with a large round table in the centre, and books placed around in mathematical precision. The absence of all knick-knacks or other little elegancies showed plainly there was no lady to arrange these matters.

There was no fire in the grate, and the room struck damp and chilly. After an interval of a few moments the woman reappeared, and said could I send in a message, as to what my business was, Mr. Bridport being very busy at that time.

CHAPTER IX.

"In things that a man would not be seen in himself, it is a point of cunning to borrow the name of the world, as to say, 'the world says,' or, 'there is a speech abroad.'"—*Bacon's Essays.*

It was a very difficult matter to send a message by the servant as to the purport of my visit; but on saying it was of importance, and I would not detain Mr. Bridport more than a few moments, she returned, after a short consultation with her master, and bade me follow her into his study. It was a long, low pitched room, with two French windows looking on to the garden. Bookshelves were ranged each side of the walls, and a large table in the centre was absolutely covered with geological and zoological specimens. A microscope stood at the further end of it, together with some bottles and tubes for chemical experiments.

The Rector was a man between sixty and seventy, of middle height, florid complexion, and a benevolent expression of countenance. His hair was silvery white, and seemed to grow in abundant quantity. His eyes, which were blue, were deeply set in the head, overshadowed with bushy white eyebrows. He wore a loose, grey dressing-gown. After motioning me to a seat, he remained standing near the table, evidently expecting me to come to the point as to the business I wished to consult him about.

Seeing my hesitation, he endeavoured to help me by asking, "Is it about the confirmation classes? Eight o'clock every Wednesday evening."

I hastened to assure him it was nothing of the kind, and, having once found the use of my tongue, told him my circumstances, annoyances, and fears. He did not interrupt, even by a single query, during the time my narrative was proceeding; but when I had finished speaking, and was waiting for him to make some answer, or at least comment on what he had heard, he remained silent, in an abstracted sort of way, for some moments. At last he raised his eyes towards me, and said—

"Did Dr. Leslie, of Oakford, send you here—to Witton Hall, I mean?"

"Yes," I replied, "for change of air and scene."

"With Miss Rhodes?"

"Yes."

He pursed up his mouth, and drew a long low

whistle. At length he turned to his table, and, taking up a fossilized atlas bone, said, "Oh the miseries uncultivated minds bring upon their owners! You should take up some definite object in life. Some scientific discovery, or mathematical problem. You will then find Witton Hall one of the most delightful and desirable of residences."

I smiled.

"Look here!" he exclaimed, beckoning me to the table, and taking up another fossilized specimen. "This," he continued, "here is the undoubted fore foot of the edentata," showing me what looked like a piece of stone. "The family Manidæ also present very singular characters, they have no teeth and feed mainly on termites. Here there is no distinction between the orbits, and the temporal fossæ," showing me another specimen, "and," he added, in great excitement, "there is no distinct lacrymal bone. Fossil remains of these have been found in the pleistocene age."

I murmured an assent; truly I was utterly at sea—and was no zoological scholar.

"Here, you see again;" taking up a small bottle, with a sort of jelly-like substance in spirits, and turning it to the light, "is one of the lowest order of vertebrates—an ascidian. Look here again," he added, placing the bottle down, and taking up another with great care, "here is a meroblastic egg!"

At this moment the cross-grained servant came in and said, "Please, sir, Mrs. Bates wants 'er baby

christened: it is very bad, an' t' doctor ses as how it won't live many hours."

"All right, all right," he answered, testily and with impatience. "I will come soon;" then turning to me, he said, in tones of deepest concern, "a meroblastic egg! you do not know how rare that specimen is—the echidna, native of Australia, is the only mammal——"

At this moment another knock was heard at the door, and in came a sturdy-looking boy, about fourteen, with a spade in his hand. "Please, sir," he said, in agitated tones, "Farmer Smith's pig is in the garden a eatin' the salary." Mr. Bridport took him by the shoulders and pushed him out of the room, telling him, in an angry manner, to drive it off, and come with no more such tales. Then he recommenced his natural history studies, muttering to himself such technical terms as—"fifth, sixth, and seventh cervical, anterior, dorsal," &c.

I felt in despair; go I must. I could not possibly prolong my visit, and I ought never to have come. Eccentric, they called Mr. Bridport; well, he was indeed. To my astonishment, as I was on the point of leaving, he descended to mundane topics, and asked me how long I thought I should stay at Witton.

"As soon as I possibly can arrange to leave I shall do so," was my reply. "Is there anyone living at the Hall besides the farm bailiff and his

wife, Miss Rhodes and myself?" I asked, thinking perhaps he might have some light or clue as to the landing visitor of the previous evening.

"I have never been to the Hall," was his guarded reply. "As far as I understand, the house has been rented by Dr. Leslie for a convenient retreat for patients, who, through being harassed, need absolute freedom from the wear and tear of town life. You, I suppose, need rest. Some love affair, I suppose. Want to marry someone without a penny, and because friends object, go into a decline. Oh! yes. I know all about it," he continued, "and this is what you are sent here for. Now take up some scientific study." Going to his book-shelves and taking down a heavy-looking volume, he placed it in my hand, saying, "Read this attentively. Study some knowledge of the extinct orders of the edentata, some of which inhabited Europe in the tertiary epoch." And wishing me good morning, he rang the bell, and bowed me out.

What could I do with this great book? I was determined I would not take it with me, so gently placing it on the hall table, I left the house. Well, I had not done much good by going to seek sympathy from the Rector. Where were all my castles in the air, built at supper the previous evening? Gone; faded into the greyest of mists, like so many other youthful hopes. I felt weary and disheartened; too much so to turn down the

long lane to Witton Hall; so sauntered vaguely, and without my usual vivacity, along the main road, passing the few cottages that comprised the village street. As I approached one, an elderly woman, with a bright pink calico sun bonnet, who was hanging out clothes in the little garden, gave me a friendly "Good day, miss." I returned the greeting, and stopping, commenced talking. She informed me that her son was gone over to Workington Park, with some spaniel pups that a gentleman who was staying there seemed likely to buy. "'E wos 'ere yesterday, a lookin' at 'em. Maybe, yer know 'im, miss? 'E left 'is name. Let me see, wot was it?" and she thought a few moments. "Oh, I know? Sir Chawles Wynton. Yer know 'im, miss?" she added, noticing my surprised look.

"Well, I do," I slowly replied, as I did not feel quite sure whether it would be prudent to tell her so. "But I did not know he was near here."

"Lor bless yer, 'e is ofting at Lord Oxburgh's. Some folks say 'e is sweet on Lady Sybil, the youngest darter; but oi doant knaw, people will talk."

"How far is it to Workington Park?"

"Bless yer! And ave yer never bin? Why, it's the show place of the county. It is a matter of eight miles, or thereabouts. Yer would 'ave to ride. But, lor," she continued, as the thought suddenly struck her, "the baker at the end 'ouse

'ere, droives over every week with flour, an' oi do b'lieve 'e is goin' to-day. My word, it is a pity yer shouldna see the place."

The baker! and going to-day? I made up my mind at once. I would ask him to let me accompany him in his cart. I would go and see Workington. I might probably see Sir Charles Wynton as well; not with any intention of ratifying any engagement, but simply to seek a reconciliation and restoration to Aunt Mary, at Woodlands, if possible, through his mediation. Accordingly, thanking the woman for her information, I walked down towards the baker's house, and there, to my great satisfaction, saw him harnessing his horse to the van, ready for starting. Without much prelude, or, indeed, any ceremony, I came to the point at once, by asking—

"Are you going to Workington?"

"Yes, miss," he replied, briskly and good-naturedly.

"May I ride in the cart with you, as I have never seen the park and house, and it is too far for me to walk there and back?"

"Oh! certainly, miss," he replied, "if it is not too humble a conveyance for you to condescend to. Your weight won't add much to the sacks of flour."

I sprang up with alacrity, needing no second bidding; and in less time than it takes to write this we were trotting along the well-kept high

road to Workington. I felt rather hungry, as it was past the luncheon hour, and I had not tasted anything since breakfast; the antiquarian rector certainly not being bent on hospitality. One could not eat raw flour from the sacks, well-filled as they were; still, if I accomplished the object of my visit to Workington, I must not mind some physical discomfort. It was a nice day, and not particularly cold, and the cart being covered, one had a little protection from the wintry wind. After driving some four or five miles along a well-kept high road, we passed through some iron gates, at the side of a neat lodge, and entered the park. What trees there were!—spreading oaks beeches, and feathery-looking elms—with a river winding through and along the side of the road in a most picturesque way. The majesty of silence, that is so impressive to a lover of Nature amidst grand touching scenes, was here instinctively felt. At last, after passing through several white wooden gates, which had to be carefully shut, we came in sight of the mansion. It lay a little in a hollow, and was a large white building of the Corinthian order of architecture; with immense stables at the back, and a cupola dome and clock.

My driver informed me that he should have to drive up to the back of the house and unload his sacks of flour; that altogether he would be there upwards of an hour, and that if I would get

down and ramble about the park, he would wait for me at the second iron gates from the stables. Pointing out several nooks and corners that were objects of interest, and above all the lake with the swans, near the conservatories, he left me to my own devices. Little indeed did he imagine that I intended calling on the ladies at the mansion.

As soon as his van was well out of sight, I approached the flight of stone steps which led up to the massive hall door, and rang the clanking bell with a little trepidation.

The summons was answered by a ponderous looking butler, who, for dignity and *ton*, might have been the Earl himself. Knowing that it would be useless to ask if I could see Lady Oxburgh, I boldly enquired if she was at home, and receiving an answer in the affirmative, was bowed into the inner hall, where a majestic wave of the hand from the eminently respectable butler consigned me to the ciceroneship of the first footman, a young man with powdered hair and immaculate calves, which showed to advantage in his tightly-drawn silk stockings. Preceding me through several suites of elegantly-furnished rooms, he ushered me into a small one, leading from a long picture gallery. A blazing fire was in the grate, and in front of it, around an elegant little table, with a silver afternoon tea-service, sat three or four ladies. On hearing my name announced, the eldest of them, evidently Lady

Oxburgh, rose to receive me, and, on finding I was a complete stranger, put on a degree of chilling hauteur, as much as to say, "I do not know you, and what is your business?" She was between fifty and sixty years of age, of middle height, rather slender in figure, and extremely well preserved, without any artificial methods. Her features were good, clearly cut and well defined, speaking dark eyes, and a natural, healthy colour in her cheeks. She was simply dressed, with a cap of Honiton lace on her head, prettily and artistically placed, evidently arranged by a maid who knew her business. Her manners were absolutely natural and free from any affectation.

The other two ladies were much younger, and evidently her daughters. The elder of the two was leaning back in an easy chair, with a little Skye terrier in her lap; the other, a tall girl, and strikingly handsome, of the brunette type, was seated before the tea-table, dispensing the beverage. They all seemed to await my speaking, so, seeing the plunge was imminent, and the ice must be broken, I commenced by saying, "I hope you will excuse the liberty I have taken in calling, but as I am staying at Witton Hall, and as my aunt is a great friend of Sir Charles Wynton's (whom I heard was staying here), I ventured to call, in hope of seeing him, as I have not heard anything from her for some time, and fear she may be ill."

Lady Oxburgh gave me a very stony stare, and, with some effort, asked, "With whom are you staying at Witton?"

"With a Miss Rhodes, a friend of Dr. Leslie's, of Oakford. He sent me here," I went on to explain, "for change of air and scene, as I was supposed to need it."

"You have not been well, then?" enquired Lady Oxburgh, with a meaning look at her daughters, and I fancied the elder formed her lips into the word "mad," as she returned her mother's glance. The younger one smiled, and, bending over the tea tray, poured out a cup of tea, which she gracefully handed to me.

"Sir Charles Wynton *is* staying here," said Lady Oxburgh, with a sense of shocked propriety at the idea of a young lady without any chaperon calling on such an errand, "but he is out hunting, and will not be in at present. If you like to leave any message with me, I will deliver it."

I considered a few moments, revolving one or two ideas in my mind, and then replied, "Thanks, very much; but if you will allow me to write a few lines, and leave it with you for him, I fancy he would better understand the purport of my visit."

Lady Oxburgh looked a little vexed, but bending her head in the direction of a door at one end of the room, which was heavily draped, told me if I went into the room beyond that I should find

writing materials. Thanking her, I rose, and passing through, entered another magnificently furnished room. The air was faint with the delicious perfume of hothouse plants and cut flowers, and the three long windows commanded a lovely view of the park. A table stood near one of them, where I saw all necessary materials for writing.

I took off my gloves slowly, thinking what I should say in my note. How much to the point I could put in as small a compass as possible, without giving any hopes of accepting his offer. I was in a difficult position, away from my friends, and naturally, having unexpectedly discovered his presence in the neighbourhood, I should seek his advice; at all events, ask him to use his influence with my aunt to ensure my speedy return to Manchester or to Woodlands.

Taking up the pen, I commenced writing. Whilst doing so, I unavoidably caught sounds of laughter, and snatches of conversation from the ladies in the adjoining tea-room. "Extraordinary thing to do." "Very pretty." "Too pretty to be mad!" Then a titter. "Miss Rhodes experienced." "Love affair, of course." Much as I wished not to hear what they said, I could not help it.

Pretty, was I? Many people had told me that, except my brothers, who declared my hair was red, and nose a decided snub. Mad! Oh! this was why I got no sympathy from Mr. Bridport.

He would not, of course, interfere with the arrangements of my guardians.

I wrote as follows:—

Dear Sir Charles Wynton,—You may be surprised to hear I am staying at Witton Hall, sent there by Dr. Leslie, I suppose, at the instigation of my Aunt, whom I have offended. You are aware of the reason. I am very unhappy, as I cannot get any communication from home, and am watched by Miss Rhodes (the lady who is with me) in a most unpleasant way. Will you kindly tell Aunt Mary I am very uncomfortable, and wish to leave here as soon as possible?—Believe me, yours truly,

ALICE WHITE.

As I was folding the missive, and about placing it in the envelope blazing with the Oxburgh coronet, the curtains of the portière were raised, and the youngest daughter, Lady Sybil, entered. Advancing in a graceful manner, she enquired if I had found all I wanted. On my replying in the affirmative, she drew a chair near to the writing table, and glancing rather timidly towards the door by which she had entered, said, "I am sorry Sir Charles is out; but if you are staying at Witton Hall, we can easily call over some day. How long are you remaining there?"

I smiled, and putting the finishing stroke to the address, replied, "Will it surprise you, if I say, until an opportunity for escape arrives."

"Escape——"

"Well, I think I am prevented from leaving or communicating with my relatives."

"But why?"

"Shall I tell you?"

"Oh, do," she eagerly returned.

"Sir Charles Wynton has proposed to me, and I have absolutely refused the offer, because there is a mystery connected with his late wife, which cannot be satisfactorily cleared. She confided a secret to my aunt, on her deathbed, to be told to her husband; and it has not been mentioned yet."

"And is this the only reason you will not accept?"

"A greater one exists—that is, I do not care for him in the least."

She heaved a sigh of relief, and the despairing lines which were round her pretty mouth seemed to relax, as she said: "Well, even after I have heard all this, I cannot see any logical reason why you should be sent away in disgrace—or anger, at all events," she added, correcting herself.

"My impression is, that it is supposed I know the secret. I may be wrong, probably I am; but Miss Rhodes' questions, and the general tenor of her conversation lead me to infer this?"

"And what if you do? It is only something trifling, I expect. A milliner's bill or silly flirtation?"

On the contrary; I believe it to be a most important secret, imperilling much."

"What! the honour of a family?"

"I should be wrong if I said so," rising to take leave, as I thought of my floury Jehu waiting at the second iron gates, "because I do not know anything about it. Please deliver this to Sir Charles Wynton. Thank you very much for your kindness. Of course, what I have said to you is confidential."

"Oh, strictly so," she replied; and ringing the bell, the powdered footman, in answer to the summons, showed me out by another way to that which I had come in by, so I did not see Lady Oxburgh again. Walking hurriedly to the gates, where I was to meet the cart, I found the man there waiting. Could my aristocratic friends have seen the mode of transit used by me to return to Witton Hall, they would have been not a little surprised. However, I did not take such points into consideration, being only too glad to have effected my purpose so easily. The baker was anxiously expecting my arrival, as I was a little late; but in answer to my expression of hoping I had not kept him very long, he answered cheerily—

"Nay, oi thought as yer would be comin' jest now. Yer went round to see the swans in the second lake, oi expect."

See the swans! yes I had indeed. If the poor

man knew he had driven Lady Oxburgh's afternoon visitor to her destination, he would doubtless never have ceased talking about it. The village politicians, at the bar parlour on Saturday nights, would have received a thrilling and true story of the rapidly advancing social levelling and fusion of ranks.

"It is a very fine place," I observed, as the horse trotted along.

"My word, it is that," he replied. "Sure there never was sich a park. Look at them trees now!" pointing to a splendid clump of oaks; "and in the summer the ferns and the water lilies is splendid. I'm sure oi can't make out 'ow these 'ere swells can't be content with the incomes they've got, but must go 'orse racin', and takin' theaytres. This 'ere estate is pretty 'eavily dipped."

"Dipped?"

"Well, mortgaged if yer like," he replied, pronouncing the "t" very distinctly. "The more they 'ave the more they wants."

"Is not everyone the same?" I replied, entering into his moralising vein. "Aspiration is one of the best traits in human character."

"Aspiration?"

"Yes, the wishing to be something better than one is—one of the greatest proofs we have of immortality."

This sentiment was verging too much on the abstruse, so my simple-minded friend took refuge

in silence, and only a few monosyllables passed until we arrived at Witton. I would not let him drive me down the lane, and giving him many thanks, I again wended my steps to the Hall, after having been absent since the morning. Arrived at the little white gate, I entered, feeling cheered by the loud barking of Rover in the back yard. Opening the door, I entered, and made my way down the dark passage to the sitting-room. The lamp was lighted, and Miss Rhodes was calmly working, evidently not in the least annoyed, or put out at my absence. She looked up on my entrance, and said in a cold satirical way :

"Oh ! you've come back, have you ?"

"Did you think I had gone home ?" I replied, wishing to tease her a little.

She sneered in the most irritating way, as she answered : "I know you couldn't !"

"Couldn't ?" I repeated.

She laughed and shrugged her shoulders ; rising, and going towards the mantelpiece, she took two letters off, which she gave me. I seized them eagerly, and glancing at the addresses saw one was from Aunt Mary, the other seemed a strange writing—a gentleman's. Tearing it open, I glanced at the signature ; it was from Dr. Leslie, and ran as follows :—

The Grange, Oakford.

Dear Miss White,—I am sorry to hear you are discontented with the arrangements and surroundings of Witton.

Dull, of course, the place would be ; but this very dulness is beneficial to the overworked nervous system in many ways. Miss Rhodes assures me you will not be contented to remain, therefore, I have written to make arrangements for your return to Woodlands next week. You will find Miss Lascelles much better. There is a little matter I feel it my duty to mention. Possibly, you may think I have no business to interfere, nor have I ever done so before. I understand you have received an offer of marriage from Sir Charles Wynton, and refused him absolutely. In this determination you have, I think, acted rightly — whether from personal antipathy or psychological influence I will not, at present, undertake to say. To this refusal you will do well to adhere. *You cannot marry Sir Charles Wynton.* I must beg of you to seek no explanation from me, as to the motives or motive, which influence me, in telling you this. Suffice it to say, that an interest in his family, and a still deeper one in you and yours, dictate this request. As for Sir Charles himself, he is perfectly unaware of my particular motive, nor is there but one person in the world cognisant of it. It will be better for you to remain only a short time at Woodlands, and then return to your home, in Manchester, where you will have no opportunity of meeting him. I saw your friend, Mr. Peel, the other day, who enquired much after you. He is quite well again, but has taken a curacy near London, and given up Oakford. You must not omit to destroy this letter, and remember, all letters are, more or less, dangerous things to keep.—With kind regards, believe me, sincerely yours,

C. Swinton Leslie.

I read and re-read this epistle, and at last, thinking I had mastered its contents sufficiently to part with it, did as I was requested—placed it on

the fire, where it smouldered and crackled in a warning manner.

What an extraordinary move! I believed Dr. Leslie had sent me here with Miss Rhodes, to tire me so heartily of dulness, as to make me gladly accept the offer I had received. I had utterly misjudged his motives evidently; it was to get me out of his way. Strange that, with so well thought-out a plan of separation, Sir Charles was at this moment in the neighbourhood of Witton, and fool that I had been, by my own impatient acts to get away from my surroundings, I had deliberately re-opened the communication by leaving that note for him at Lady Oxburgh's! "Could not marry him?" Why? Of course I could if I liked. What could be the motive? Miss Rhodes watched me carefully from under her eyes, as she appeared to be diligently sewing. At last she volunteered the remark, "You seem very thoughtful."

"Am I?" said I, looking away from the fire, as I broke the seal of Aunt Mary's letter, and commenced to read it. In it she said that, feeling much better, she hoped to see me at Woodlands next week; was sorry I had not enjoyed my visit to Witton; had always heard it was a lovely neighbourhood, etc.; hoped that when I did return, there would be an end of all my silly nonsense, and that I should accept the splendid offer I had received, and allow preparations to proceed for my wedding.

Dr. Leslie was evidently not acting in concert with her, and the letter I had received from him must be entirely and absolutely a spontaneous offshoot of a mental decision completed. It would be of no use his forbidding me to question his motives, that would naturally be the very first thing I should do when I saw him.

"Miss Rhodes," I exclaimed, "I think I know that gentleman who was in the front kitchen the other evening."

"You are very clever, no doubt," she replied, "considering you could not possibly have seen enough of him to judge who he was. But come," she said, in a cross, authoritative way, "it is quite time you went upstairs, and took off your things."

"I'm afraid of that woman."

"What woman, you silly foolish child?"

"Mary. Is she here now?"

Miss Rhodes turned a little pale, either from rage or fear, and replied, "I cannot answer for the vagaries of your imagination. It is a pity you have no occupation. Go and get the algebra, and let us work out that problem together."

"The one about the hands of the clock?"

"Yes, that one if you like."

"No. The only problem I will work out is the problem of Mary and Charlie. x = Mary $\therefore x +$ Charlie is the unknown quantity I saw on the landing last night."

CHAPTER X.

"The flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow dies.
All that we wish to stay
Tempts, and then flies."

—*Shelley.*

A FEW days elapsed and I heard nothing further; no answer to the note I had left for Sir Charles Wynton was received. One morning, when I was walking in the yew tree avenue, in front of the house, which commanded a view of the road, I saw a little carriage drawn by two bay ponies, coming down the hill; a young lady was driving, and was the only occupant of the carriage, with the exception of a smart little tiger, who sat behind, with his arms folded in a most knowing way; and when it drew up at the gate, he jumped out, and went to the ponies' heads. I saw then it was Lady Sybil, and ran down to meet her, and led her

into the only drawing-room Witton Hall afforded. Miss Rhodes was not in, having gone some errand to the village; so I did the honours, and begged my visitor to be seated. She looked very handsome, and her hat, which was of black velvet, with feathers, of a picturesque shape, suited her to perfection.

"Miss White," she commenced, "I am sure you will be surprised to see me; but I am the bearer of two messages, one from Sir Charles Wynton, apologising for not having answered your note, but he wishes me to say, he has written to your aunt at Woodlands; the other message is from my mother, who has discovered she knew your aunt very well indeed some years ago, and therefore hopes you will come and spend a few days with us? If Miss Rhodes objects to your coming alone, we shall be pleased to see her as well."

"You are very kind," I replied, "but on returning home from your house the other day, I found arrangements had been made for me to leave here next week."

"To leave here! But you will be going home?" she enquired, with some anxiety in her tone.

"Certainly, to Woodlands first, and then to Manchester."

"Oh! I am sorry," she continued, "but still, what can there be to prevent your coming to stay with us at once; it must be very dull here?"

"It is deadly so," I replied, "but the visit will

soon be over; I suppose the country air has improved my health."

"Let us hope there is some equivalent for burying one like you alive," laughed Lady Sybil, showing a lovely set of fine, white teeth, as she did so.

We continued conversing some time, being mutually pleased with each other, when Miss Rhodes entered. As I had not mentioned my visit to Workington, it was very difficult to explain; of course she knew Lady Sybil by sight, as she was often shopping in Netfold. I merely introduced my visitor, and let Miss Rhodes wonder as much as she liked. When I mentioned the kind invitation sent by Lady Oxburgh, she looked more mystified than ever, but had sufficient tact not to betray herself by any *gaucherie*. When my visitor rose to take leave, I accompanied her, and as she passed slowly through the garden, she admired the lovely deep green of the yew avenue. Getting into the carriage, she wished me good-bye, pressing my hand with some warmth, saying, "Do come the day after to-morrow, if possible. We will send a carriage for you"—and flicking the spirited ponies with the end of her whip, the trim little equipage was soon out of sight. I stood watching it as long as I could, then slowly retraced my steps to the house. When I entered the room, Miss Rhodes was almost livid with suppressed passion, and attacked me at once, for keeping from her

the fact that I knew the Oxburgh's. I explained as well as I could, and of course, that only made her more angry ; then, when she calmed down a little, I told her Aunt Mary was an old friend of Lady Oxburgh's and therefore that was the reason she wished me to stay there for a few days, before returning to Woodlands ; and that she was included in the invitation.

"I shan't think of accepting it," she replied "and as for you, I shall not allow you to go."

"Oh ! I must. Aunt Mary would not like me to refuse."

"You must write to her at once then, and get her leave. You do not go without."

"Oh, well, I can do that," I replied. Going to my writing desk and getting out the materials, I sat down in order to catch the five o'clock post. My letters seemed lately to have reached their destination ; at all events I received answers. The evening was passed in dudgeon, and towards bed-time Miss Rhodes went out into the kitchen under the excuse of giving some orders, really to have a chat with the "chuckling" old woman. I sat quietly reading, not feeling time hang very heavily. When she returned, banging the door after her, she came up to me, saying, "Alice, I have heard that Sir Charles Wynton is staying at Workington ? Do you mean to say that you did not know this ?"

"Yes, I knew it, but I have not seen him."

"Dear me! Dr. Leslie would not like your going to stay at Workington."

"Why should he interfere?" said I, not letting her know what he had told me in his letter.

"He has reasons for not wishing it, I believe," she replied curtly, and nothing more was said on the subject. I knew it would be futile on my part to attempt to gain any motive apparent to Miss Rhodes for Dr. Leslie's reasons.

Aunt Mary's consent arrived; the invitation to Workington was accepted, and all arrangements were made for our leaving Witton. Miss Rhodes would go to London for a short visit, as she did not wish to accompany me to the Oxburghs'; really, I was not sorry.

The day before we left she went into Netfold shopping, and as she did not take me with her I was free to follow my own devices. Accordingly, I thought I would go into the kitchen, and try to strike up a conversation with the "chuckling old woman." I had not yet got any satisfactory explanation of the weird creature, who had waylaid me in the corridor that dark evening, and I thought before leaving the ghostly old hall, with its grim surroundings, I might make an effort to attempt some discovery. Accordingly I went in, and found the old woman busy pastry-making. Her husband had gone to market with the butter and eggs, so we were not likely to be disturbed for some time.

"So I'm going to-morrow, Mrs. Gore," I said,

"and Miss Rhodes the day after. You'll be dull, won't you?" She chuckled in her usual manner before making any reply, placing her head first on one side then on the other, and giving the dough sundry little pats, said, "There's allays a plenty to do 'ere!"

"So there may be," I laughed, "but there will be nobody to talk to."

"I'm not much of a one for torkin', my 'usband bein' so deaf, so yer see I 'ave got in the 'abit of sayin' little."

"Have you got a sister or any one living here?"

She looked up at me with some surprise before she answered, then said, "Sister, lor, no!"

"The reason I asked you," said I, "is that some one came up to me in the corridor one evening, when it was quite dark, and, taking hold of me, said she wanted 'Charlie.' I thought perhaps it would be some friend of yours staying here. She said her name was Mary."

She was silent for a few seconds, then replied, "Oh! that person. Well, look 'ere, miss, you mustn't tell Miss Rhodes oi told yer. But there wos some one 'ere for a few days, but she is gone now."

"Gone! and who was she? A relation of yours, I suppose?"

"Nay, miss. She warn't nothin' of moine. Some poor feckless thing that wos off 'er 'ead."

"Who brought her here?"

"Nay, oi doan't know; oi wos only told to get a room ready. She 'ad some one with 'er; but oi niver 'ad much to do with 'em, 'cept take their meals up."

"Did you not know her name?"

"Noa; oi wos niver told. Miss Rhodes knew I dessay, but yer mustn't mention it, miss, or oi may lose my place."

"Oh! I shan't betray you," I replied. "Where do you think she went?"

"Eh! to some o' them places over the water," she replied, giving her pastry sundry vigorous punches. This seemed to be the general destination of all the Witton "cases," in the mind of this old woman. She evidently thought "going over the water" some bourne from whence no traveller returns of the "feckless" kind.

"Well," said I, shaping out some little pieces of paste, "I'm not going over the water; Workington is my destination."

"Eh! a moighty foine place; a deal of gentry stays there."

"So I suppose. When did that 'feckless lady' go away?" I asked, returning to my former subject.

She thought a moment, then replied in a mysterious manner, and in a hoarse voice, "Well, miss, she wos took away in the noight, but I mustn't say where."

"Then I am not such a light sleeper after all, as I never heard her," I replied.

After a little more conversation I left the kitchen, and went upstairs to my packing. This much had I gained, that my meeting on the corridor that evening was not imagination, as Miss Rhodes had led me to believe.

The next morning a brougham from Workington was sent for me, and wishing the wretched place and all its inmates "Good-bye," I gladly left, once more to enter the civilised world. I did not see Sir Charles Wynton at luncheon, as he was out, and afterwards we drove till five. Sybil and Emily seemed to make so much of me, that it was quite a delightful change from being snubbed by Miss Rhodes; and the day passed pleasantly enough. When I went upstairs to dress for dinner, I found my things had already been unpacked by the maid. I was a little uncertain what to wear, but decided on a very pretty pale blue gown, made in an æsthetic style. This colour toned down my ruddy locks and brilliant complexion; and a few snowdrops pinned at my neck completed the effect. Taking a final look in the glass, and feeling satisfied with myself, I descended to the drawing-room, where there were several people assembled. The old earl, a great cattle breeder, an irritable and testy kind of man, who allowed no one to differ from him in opinion without losing his temper, was standing on the hearth-rug with his back to the fire, laying down the law in a dogmatic manner to a small group of "toadies"

assembled near. Lady Oxburgh was in deep conversation with two elderly ladies, and Sybil and Emily were moving about amongst the guests in an animated bright manner. Sinking into a chair near the door, where I hoped I should be free from observation, I remained a few minutes watching the people. At last I felt a shadow near me, and on looking up saw it was Sir Charles Wynton.

He smiled graciously, and saying, "I think I am to take you in to dinner—old friends, you know," sat down on a low chair beside me. "And so you have left Witton?" he continued. "What on earth induced your aunt to send you there, I cannot conceive."

"To give me time for reflection, and repent of my follies, I suppose," I replied, looking down at the pattern of the carpet.

"I could not come over to Witton in answer to your note," he continued. "I had heard you were there previously, and called, but Miss Rhodes refused to let me see you."

"Refused!"

"Yes; she said your doctor objected to your seeing visitors." Strange, thought I. "It must have been wretchedly dull."

"It was, but it is at an end now," I replied, unfurling my fan.

Dinner was announced, and no more was said, except generalities. It was served in exquisite

taste, and I had enough to do in watching all the people around me, and the mild flirtations. After dinner, when the ladies assembled in the drawing-room, Sybil came up to me in her graceful clinging fashion, and linking her arm in mine, led me into the conservatory, to a quiet corner near some camellia shrubs. Two well cushioned basket chairs were in this recess, and a dim religious light was shed from two or three Chinese lanterns which were hanging in different parts. Pushing me into a chair she exclaimed: "Oh! you darling. I do admire you so intensely. I watched you at dinner. I think you like Sir Charles Wynton better than you would lead people to believe from what you say."

"One must be decently civil," said I, plucking a camellia, and playing with its petals, to avoid further questioning.

Sybil laughed, but finding I was not going to humour her inquisitive vein, the conversation passed on to other subjects. By and bye she left me, as her mother called her to go in and give them some music. I was glad to be left alone; and was thoroughly enjoying the pleasant sounds which were wafted on my ears, when I saw Sir Charles Wynton advancing, and he took the chair that Sybil had vacated.

"I am very glad to have this opportunity of speaking to you," he commenced. "Alice, I have had enough of this. I have forgiven you all the

cruel things you said to me that day at Woodlands. There is a church in this park; the clergyman is dining here, and I have a licence in my pocket. Meet me at the church porch to-morrow morning at eleven, I will have two witnesses with me, and before twelve you shall be Lady Wynton."

I looked down, and plucked the crimson petals of a camellia. What answer could I make?

He noticed my hesitation, and taking my hand in his, pressed it with vehement passion. "Come, now, you know both your aunt and mother wish this marriage. There is nothing to wait for, and there is no time like the present. Let us give them a pleasant surprise."

Still no answer. Dr. Leslie's italicised words in his letter danced before my eyes: "*You cannot marry Sir Charles Wynton!*"

"Hesitating still?" he continued, looking up in my face. "Come, speak, my love."

"I was thinking," I answered slowly, "that perhaps Lord Oxburgh might not like me to do such a secret thing whilst a guest in his house."

"Lord Oxburgh!" he exclaimed. "Why, my child, as long as you are not a short horned ox he will never trouble his head about you."

"It is so dreadfully sudden."

"Not at all; for months this affair has been talked of. As you cannot decide anything, others will have to do so for you, and as your future husband, I will."

"So it seems."

"Come now, Alice, promise me you will do as I wish."

"Marry you to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Oh! it is too sudden; besides, I must ask mother again, first," I said, taking hold of the very lamest excuse I could have made.

"Nonsense!" he continued. "You know she wishes it. I have it from her own lips."

"But," I argued, "the reasons I gave against accepting your offer still exist, and as far as I see, they have not been cleared up yet."

"Reasons?" he replied, with a gesture of impatience, "there are no reasons. Come now, meet me to-morrow, as I wish; a carriage shall be waiting at the church door, and we will start for Paris directly the parson has tied the knot. I can make definite arrangements with him to-night."

"What could I say to Lady Oxburgh?" said I. "It looks to me so mean to act in such a way."

"Alice," he replied, looking cautiously round to see there were no listeners concealed in the foliage, "she knows how things are and will not be much surprised." At this moment our conversation was interrupted by some people coming into the conservatory. He rose, and saying to me, "Promise; I shall expect you," advanced to speak to the two ladies who had just entered. What folly

had I not stooped to in making such a promise. With Dr. Leslie's warning, and my own antipathy still before me, was anything more wanting in judgment? Would not the most sensible plan be to wait until I returned to Woodlands, and had seen Dr. Leslie, when I might get some definite clue as to his reasons, even if he would not tell me his motives. My visit at Workington would end in another day. Would it not be better to act with firmness, and not be at the trysting place to-morrow morning? Firmly keeping this resolve uppermost in my mind, fatigue overcame me, and I fell asleep.

The morning rose brightly. I got up, and dressed with care, and, ringing for the maid, asked her to bring my breakfast to my room. This I did purposely, to avoid meeting Sir Charles down-stairs. Writing a little note, in which I said I felt I could not accede to his request, I gave it to her to put into the hands of his valet.

About eleven o'clock I sauntered down to the morning-room, where other ladies were assembled, writing letters and chatting. He did not appear at luncheon, neither did I expect he would; nothing was seen or heard of him all the afternoon, but when we were assembled in the drawing-room before dinner, I heard others saying he had gone to London—been telegraphed for. Of course, this was what I expected he would do, and although I felt an undefinable regret that I had not had an

opportunity of speaking to him, still I felt that in keeping up to my resolve, I had done right.

The next day I returned to Woodlands, and received so many kind words and protestations of lasting affection from Lady Oxburgh and her daughters, I felt very glad I had acted in a firm way.

I found Aunt Mary delighted to see me, although she was looking rather pale and thin. A long letter was awaiting me from mother, saying she thought now I had been away long enough, and hoped she should soon see me home again. Aunt Mary seemed interested in hearing about my doings at Witton, and was much amused at the account I gave of the "chuckling" old woman. She said she knew Miss Rhodes slightly, and always considered her a clever, capable sort of woman; very good at managing nervous, delicate people. She asked me if I had seen Sir Charles Wynton. I told her yes, but that my determination remained unaltered, as yet. "It is a pity," she replied, "a great pity, for he would be devoted to your welfare, and it would be so desirable a settlement in life." I did not mention anything Dr. Leslie had told me in his letter, as I meant fully to keep that to myself, until I had had an opportunity of conversing with him. I felt quite light-hearted and in good spirits at being away from that ghostly Witton Hall, and the peppery little Miss Rhodes. One afternoon Aunt Mary

went in the pony carriage to make some calls on neighbours; I did not care to accompany her, so remained at home; and going back into the drawing-room, took up a book and commenced to read the beautiful lines on "Time long Past," by Shelley:—

"Like the ghost of a dear friend dead
Is time long past.
A tone which is now forever fled,
A hope that is now forever past,
A love so sweet it could not last,
Was time long past."

After having read some time, I noticed the fire had got very low and needed coals, so I rang the bell. No one answered, so I rang again. I knew John was out with the pony carriage, and Sylvester had gone to see her mother, who was ill; but, under these circumstances, it was the housemaid's place to attend to the bells. No one answered my second ring, and thinking she might be upstairs dressing, I thought I would go to the servants' rooms at the top of the house, and tell her coals were wanted at once in the drawing-room. Running up, and peeping into all the rooms, I found no one there, and as I turned hastily to go down the stairs, my foot slipped in some way, and I fell with force against the panelled wall. To my astonishment the panel flew open, and disclosed a flight of stairs, and another story above! The stairs were of oak,

and seemed worn and dirty. With cautiousness I ascended, peeping about to see if I could see anyone. Arrived at the top, I found a long narrow passage, only lighted by a small skylight; on the left hand side were two doors, both closed, and a similar one on the right. I thought it would be as well to explore, so opened the first door on the left. The room was empty, lighted by a small window in the roof. The floor was exceedingly dirty, and pieces of straw, and the coverings of champagne bottles were littered about. Going on to the next door, I opened it and went in. Here much the same appearance met my view, an exceedingly dirty empty room cobwebs hanging from the ceiling in profusion; and the panes of glass of the small window, which admitted a few feeble rays of light, were crusted with dirt, the accumulation of months. Crossing the passage, I opened the opposite door, and here I saw a long large room, the floor covered with linoleum. A small kitchen range, with boiler attached, and hot and cold water taps, was at one side; there was no fire, and the ashes and cinders were all left in the grate. An iron bedstead, with a common blue quilt, stood at one side. A small wooden table, and two or three cane chairs, completed the furniture of the room, which was lighted only by a small skylight. Looking into a cupboard on one side of the fire place, I saw cups and saucers, plates, dishes, forks, and spoons;

in fact, all that was necessary for the service of simple meals. The cupboard the other side was locked, but on a shelf below it were jars of arrowroot, rice, sago, and the like. The walls were panelled in oak in a rough unornamented sort of way.

Wondering if any one could be about, I called in a timid voice, for I felt not a little frightened, "Is any one here?" No answer, but the shaking of the panes of glass of the skylight by the wind. Strange indeed! As I looked again, my eye was struck with what seemed another door at the end of the room. Although the panelling was ingeniously arranged, and might have deceived any one who had not good sight, after pushing it and trying to get it open for some time, I discovered a small wooden button, which, on being pressed, raised a spring on the other side, and the door flew open. What met my gaze was as follows:— An elegantly furnished bedroom, arranged, no doubt, for bed and sitting-room, in the continental fashion. The carpet was square, with a border of lilies of the valley woven round. The centre was of a pale ultramarine shade, with conventional bouquets of lilies. The boards around were stained and highly polished. In a recess stood a small bed, with hangings of Surah silk of the same shade as the carpet. The chairs and settees were upholstered in the same material. The walls were coloured in pale blue, and hung with good

water-colour drawings and dark blue China plates. A bookshelf, fitted into a recess, contained all the modern novels of the day, and several works of the best poets. An easel, with an incompleted oil sketch, stood in one corner. The dressing-table was of the same white polished wood, with wax candles fitted into sconces on each side of the looking-glass. A few dead snowdrops lay neglected near the pincushion, and a glove of a very small size near to it.

A photograph of Dr. Leslie was on the mantelpiece, in a little plush frame. The wardrobe and other drawers were securely locked, all seemed put away, and perfectly neat. Whose apartments were these? And into the depths of what mystery had my awkward fall caused me to penetrate? Was I dreaming? and if I recounted this adventure to any one, should I be told it was imagination? Taking out a pencil, and tearing off a slip of paper from my pocket-book, I wrote these words: "I have seen these rooms," signing it, "Alice White," and placed it on the table. I left, carefully closing the panel after me, then through the long low kitchen, into the corridor, and down the rickety stairs. No one was about, and I cautiously closed the large oak panel; pressing it firmly, I heard a clicking sound, and it fastened again. Examining it closely, I found it could be opened from the outside by a small round key, similar to those that open railway carriages, and to

a cursory observer it merely appeared like a little worm-eaten hole in the panel. There was no doubt that the person who went out before me had merely closed the panel, and omitted to lock it; hence my discovery. Going downstairs into the drawing-room I found the fire had been replenished, so I sat down to ponder and muse over my afternoon's work. The return of Aunt Mary, with Ethel Wilkins, to spend the evening, put a stop to my reverie. I did not intend mentioning what I had seen to any one, except Dr. Leslie, when I sought some explanation from him, but I should of course have to await the opportunity. I would see whether anything was said to me about the slip of paper I had left on the table, in the mysterious boudoir! Ethel shook hands in a most gracious manner, congratulating me on my blooming appearance, but even then I could detect a covert sneer in all she said. As we were talking she said, "I suppose you have heard Mr. Peel has left Oakford, entirely on your account, I believe."

"On my account?"

"Yes, little Miss Innocence," she gaily replied. "I suppose you will not be surprised to hear he was very much smitten with you, and seeing no chance of your sharing a curacy with him, he left the neighbourhood. He thinks, you see, you have very aspiring views—no one but a baronet or an earl for you."

"I do not see why you should say anything of the kind," I replied. "You know very well there is no one I care for. I should much prefer never to marry."

"Indeed! Then it is not true you are engaged to Sir Charles Wynton?"

"Certainly not."

"Oh!" said she, "gossips will have it so, and that the reason you were sent away was because you would not consent, but as soon as you did you were to return to Woodlands."

"What a pity," said I, "that people will not mind their own business."

"That you will never get them to do, preach as much as you like. They very much prefer finding out all they can about other people. For instance, now, you are an interesting study, as far as I can judge. Every man falls head over ears in love with you, yet you seem to reciprocate nothing, by your own account," and she laid an ironical stress on the last three words of her sentence. Had I been a man I should like to have struck her, so wantonly, keenly irritating was she.

"As you say every one likes to know others' business, you knew poor Lady Wynton?" I enquired. "What was the mystery about her death."

"I am sure I cannot tell you. She was jealous and unreasonable."

"She died so suddenly?"

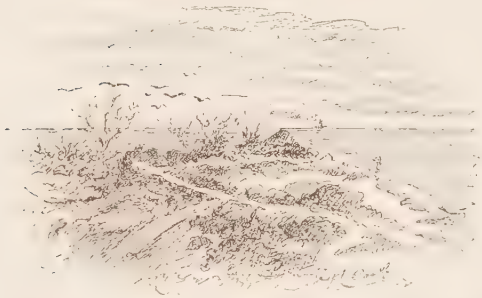
"Well, yes; but you see she was never very strong. There was some mystery about her death, but I do not think any one got hold of the right story. However, it is all past and gone now. I never see the use of raking up old scandals."

"Did you know her well?"

"Very well, but latterly, I believe, she took a dislike to me; she was suspicious, and very jealous."

CHAPTER XI.

"Why for the dead, who are at rest!
Pray for the living, in whose breast
The struggle between right and wrong
Is raging terrible and strong."—*Golden Legend.*



At this point of the conversation, Aunt Mary came in, and the subject was no longer discussed. Whilst she sat chatting with Ethel, I leaned back on the sofa, deeply engaged with my thoughts, and how I should act with reference to the mysterious "top floor." Who had occupied it? Why had its existence never been breathed to me by any person in Woodlands, or out of it? and, more mysterious than anything else, why was Dr. Leslie's photograph there? At this moment my reverie was interrupted by a letter being brought to me. The handwriting seemed strange, and on opening it I found it was from Mr. Peel, saying he was in the neighbourhood for a few days, and wished to see me.

Shortly afterwards Dr. Leslie came over to see Aunt Mary, who was not feeling very well, and remaining in her room. I was in the drawing-room when he came down stairs, and noticed the expression of his face was stern and very grave. Had he been up to the top storey, and found the paper I had written and left on the table? Seating himself near me, he commenced to converse, asking me several questions concerning my stay at Witton. He seemed vexed I had gone to Workington, more particularly when I told him that Sir Charles Wynton was staying there, and had been very anxious to induce me to consent to a clandestine marriage.

"But," I continued, "I remembered the words in your letter, and remained firm, spite of all his persuasions. Now, Dr. Leslie, we are alone, will you tell me why I cannot marry Sir Charles Wynton, supposing I chose to do so? My friends all wish for the match, and, indeed, my persistent refusal of the offer has vexed them very much." He made no reply, but leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, rested his head in his hands, and remained for some few moments lost in thought. At last raising himself, and looking uneasily round the room, he replied, "If I do so, it will only be because I have too sincere a regard for your aunt and yourself to allow you to sacrifice your happiness; but it will be very imprudent on my part, there is no doubt."

"You may trust me," was the remark I volunteered.

"May I?" he replied, in an ironical manner. "But you are hardly aware of, nor can you realise the magnitude of the secret that possibly I may trust you with. However, in the meanwhile do not suffer yourself to be persuaded by Sir Charles. Let me see, he is not at Burnham at present?"

"The last I heard of him he was in London."

"Ah! well, so far so good. But I must arrange some time in which I can have an hour's private conversation with you, when we are not likely to be overheard. Stone walls sometimes have ears," and he looked nervously in the direction of the door. I dare say he thought Sylvester was quite capable of listening, when she had the opportunity. He turned towards the garden window, and stood there for some few moments wrapt in thought. Suddenly he exclaimed, "I have it; you must come and stay with us for a day or two."

"Will Aunt Mary let me? I have been away so much lately."

"Leave it to me," he replied. "I will arrange matters, and now, good-bye. I cannot keep my horse waiting any longer. My coachman gives me the most reproachful looks if I exceed my usual time in a visit. Mind, not a word to anyone of what I have arranged," and, shaking my hand with some fervour, he left Woodlands. I watched the brougham as it went along the park road, not a little wonder-

ing as to the nature of the secret I was to be told. Running up to Aunt Mary, I asked if I could do anything for her, and was soon busily engaged in writing some letters at her dictation. She wished me to go into Oakford after lunch, and do some shopping, and call on the Wilkins.

I drove in, then despatched the pony carriage home, laden with the different parcels from the shops, and went on to the Rectory, as, it being such a fine day, I preferred to walk back.

Mrs. Wilkins seemed much pleased to see me, and welcomed me very kindly. They were busy working for a bazaar, and she showed me with some pride many pretty things devised and worked by Ethel. I stayed rather longer than I ought to have done, and then remembering the walk I had before me, started for Woodlands, after promising to call again as soon as possible.

It was a lovely spring afternoon, and the carolling of the lark and the light air made me feel quite joyous, and I walked along briskly. After I had got well away from the town, and was out in the open country, I fancied I heard footsteps behind me. Turning round to see who it was I saw Mr. Peel. He advanced, and greeted me with effusiveness, asking how it was I had sent no answer to his note. To this enquiry I replied that I seemed to have no opportunity, as my aunt was much of an invalid, and needed most of my attention. He certainly was much altered by his illness, and

looked pale and haggard. He apologised to me for his strange behaviour that evening at the Rectory, saying he was then far from well, and worked up by jealousy, "for, of course, you know I love you," he added. "Jealousy is one of the most maddening of passions. But you seem so self-reliant and self-contained, I cannot fancy you in any way understand the power of its influence."

"So it seems," said I. "But, Mr. Peel, do you remember taking that revolver out of the drawer in the Rectory library? Were you intending to shoot me?"

"Far from it," he replied with energy. "On the contrary, if I meant to shoot anyone it would be myself. I was very much worked up, and I know that as soon as I left the Rectory, finding I had in some strange manner possessed myself of the revolver, I returned to replace it. I cannot exactly remember where I put it. I was then on the eve of brain fever, as you must have eventually heard. Happily I was not mad enough to commit the crime of suicide. Reason prevailed, and my stupid act only leads me to be certain, how ill I was at the time."

We walked on for some few moments in silence, then he commenced a long conversation, in which he expressed sincere hopes, as I evidently was not intending to marry Sir Charles Wynton, that I would make him the happy man; his prospects were much improved, and the unexpected death of

an aunt, placed him in a far more independent position as regards means.

To all this I listened, but my mind was so unsettled with my discovery of the top floor at Woodlands, Dr. Leslie's promise of unravelling a secret of magnitude, and other matters, that I felt I could pledge myself to nothing; never did anyone feel less in a frame of mind to be approached on such a subject than I did at that moment, and I told him I could make no promises, nor pledge myself to anything of the kind, until I had returned to my mother in Manchester, when I might think over the proposal.

He seemed disappointed at this decision, and said he would have to return to Oakford, as he was taking duty for Canon Wilkins that evening. As he shook hands to say good bye, he maintained his grasp, saying :—

"Alice, may I have substantial reasons to hope? I will do all that is in the power of man to render you happy."

"It is impossible for me to commit myself to any promises at present," I replied. "I am much harassed at present, and until I obtain a little freedom from anxiety, will not make any promise. Do not think of me, Mr. Peel; love some one more worthy of you, and more likely to make you happy."

"You are merely saying this as an empty compliment," said he, "but remember, I love but

one girl in the world, and that is you." Then loosing his grasp from my hand, and raising his hat, he left me, taking the route for Oakford. And walking with quick, hurried steps, I continued my solitary way on to Woodlands, and on arriving, found a little note from Dr. Leslie. Tearing it open, I saw it contained a few lines to the effect that I was to go over to stay at his house for a couple of days, on Thursday, and this was Tuesday. Two long weary days before I should know the secret of the top floor! I did not mention anything to Aunt Mary of the circumstances relative to my meeting with Mr. Peel, but kept to the bare fact that I had seen him on the Oakford Road, and that he looked very haggard and ill. I began to be undecided in my mind. I made comparisons, and the deduction was nearly always in favour of the calm aristocratic bearing of Sir Charles Wynton, as opposed to the obtrusive fussiness of Mr. Peel. Was he not the kind of man who would always be on the worry, and most probably end by being an intolerable bore? A modern writer has said it is equally trying for a wife to be happy with either a fool or a genius. Was not the line of mediocrity which separated these extremes, ill-defined in either of the men who had proposed to me?

I went over on Thursday, as pre-arranged, to Dr. Leslie's at Oakford, and had only been there a few hours, when Mrs. Leslie received a telegraphic

summons to the death-bed of one of her relatives. As circumstances rendered it imperative that she should go, I was left alone, with only the companionship of her mother, who was on a visit to them, and was as deaf as a post. Certainly, if Dr. Leslie feared the ears of the stone walls at Woodlands, in telling me the secret, he had no occasion to fear those of his own kin at home.

The next day, after luncheon, he came into the dining-room where I was sitting with a book, and told me in German, a language in which he was fluent, to retire early, pleading fatigue to his mother-in-law, and come straight to his study, when I should hear that which I wished to know. I was very restless all the rest of the day, and formed all kinds of mental conclusions as to the secret, as far from a right solution as it was possible.

About ten o'clock I wished Mrs. Barton good night, pleading fatigue and a wish to retire early, and made my way to the doctor's study. He seemed to be awaiting me, as the door flew open at my approach; he almost pulled me in, and closing the door noiselessly behind me, shut another thick baize one, which was inside, and effectually prevented any sound escaping to the outside corridor. Whilst he was doing this I was struck with the ghastly pallor of his face. Having made all secure, he motioned me to an easy chair near his writing-table, then seating himself near,

commenced in a husky, repressed tone of voice, "Miss White, I have been foolish enough to consent to gratify your curiosity as to the reasons that exist against your marrying Sir Charles Wynton. Your youth and innocence have been the two chief factors which have led me to see the moral necessity of doing so, more especially as I find you were on the eve of a clandestine marriage with him whilst at Workington Park. At the same time it must not be lost sight of for one moment that the secret affects me very seriously. I imagined, from what I heard you had said to Sir Charles Wynton that day at Woodlands, that by some means or other you had obtained possession of the secret. There was but one move in such a case that I could make for my protection, and that was by representing that it was probable you were the victim of hysteria, hallucinations, and morbid fancies. I persuaded your Aunt Mary to view the matter in the same light, recommending change of air, and some slight restraint. Accordingly you were sent down to Witton, in charge of Miss Rhodes, a lady skilled and experienced in cases of the kind. Such a person, who is constantly with people of this sort, will always believe and testify to the insane proclivities of any patient under her charge, especially when placed there by a medical man who is reputed to have some knowledge of psychological cases. She reported you evidently

knew nothing of any secret that might exist concerning the Woodlands mystery, but certainly were most excitable and unmanageable at times. Therefore, if by any foolish shortsightedness you mention one word of what you will hear from me to-night, outside this room, I shall immediately say you are labouring under insane hallucinations, and no one believes an improbable and highly unlikely story, if it is once promulgated by a person with dementia."

He looked earnestly at me for some moments after speaking; but I did not know what to reply, so I maintained silence.

Finding I did not answer, he continued, saying: "You have, no doubt, been informed it was supposed Lady Wynton took poison in an overdose of chloral, after returning from London, on a mysterious visit of three days, of the particulars of which she would give no account?"

"I have heard reports of the kind," I replied, wishing he would come to the point.

"So far so good," he said; "and now I will commence my story."

"One day I was summoned in all haste by a mounted messenger from Burnham Park, asking me to go over at once to see Lady Wynton, who was dangerously ill. On arrival, I found she was suffering from an overdose of chloral, and immediately injected ether into her veins, in the hope she would rally. Her mother was the only person

with her, as Sir Charles had not yet returned, the telegram sent to his club in London having so far failed to elicit a reply. At last, she seemed to revive, and asked for your Aunt Mary to be sent for, as she wished to confide something to her ear alone. This was done, and a few moments after she had left for Woodlands, whilst her mother and I were congratulating ourselves on the improvement, a knock was heard at the bedroom door. Mrs. Abbott rose, and went forward quietly to answer it. The footman was outside, with a card on a silver waiter. 'The gentleman wishes to see Lady Wynton,' was his explanation, 'and will take no refusal.' Mrs. Abbott took up the card, and scrutinised it carefully. The inscription was neat, 'Mr. Bowden.' 'Bowden!' she repeated, 'I never heard of the name. What on earth does he want?' turning towards me. I came towards the door and interfered. 'You blockhead,' said I to the footman; 'you know Lady Wynton is at the point of death, and can see no one. Go down at once, and dismiss this visitor.' The man retreated sheepishly, and I went back to the bedside of my patient, whilst Mrs. Abbott moaned over the stupidity of servants. The knock was heard again; the man had returned, and, indeed, looked very abject. 'I beg your pardon, sir,' he said, 'but the gentleman will not go till he has seen you or her ladyship.' 'Oh!' said Mrs. Abbott, 'if you don't mind, do go down, and arrange matters with

him. He is evidently some escaped lunatic.' I needed no second bidding, my blood boiling with rage at the cool persistency and impertinence of this man's conduct, whoever and whatever he was. Opening the library door, where I understood the footman to say he had shown him, I entered in an abrupt, agitated manner. A tall, fair man, who was standing near one of the windows, advanced to meet me. He was neatly dressed, with an air of great respectability, but not exactly what one would call a gentleman. He was very apologetic, but I would scarcely listen to him, and expostulated in rather hot terms, explaining that Sir Charles was not at home, and serious illness would prevent Lady Wynton from seeing him. He listened to all I said with great attention; then, taking a notebook from his pocket, and looking over some papers, produced a photograph, which he showed me. So surprised was I, that the exclamation, 'Lady Wynton!' involuntarily escaped my lips, so strange did I think it that an utter stranger, such as Mr. Bowden was supposed to be, should possess anything of the kind. 'Ah!' he replied, with a gleam of satisfaction spreading over his features, 'I am right.' 'Pray explain yourself,' said I. He took hold of my arm with a firm grasp, and said, 'Are you the doctor?' 'I do not see what right you have to ask any question of the kind.' 'It is simply this right, sir,' he answered. 'I am one of the detective force from Scotland Yard,

sent down to apprehend Lady Wynton on a charge of murder, committed in London two days ago.' 'Murder?' I repeated, 'impossible!' whilst my heart seemed absolutely to stand still. 'Too true, sir,' he said. 'I have the warrant here;' and on this he showed it to me. 'As I understand, you are the doctor in attendance on Lady Wynton; if you deceive me as to the state of her health, or connive at her escape, you do this at your peril. And now,' said he, 'I must be shown upstairs to her room. I will promise in no way to agitate or distress her; she can, if she likes, for the present think I am another doctor, but I shall not leave this house without her, if she lives. If you say it would be fatal to her life to move her to-morrow, then I will telegraph for our own doctor to come down, and see if he has the same opinion as yourself.' 'My good man,' I said, 'she cannot live two hours.' 'So much the better for her family and herself.' 'Who is she accused of murdering?' I asked. 'A lady in one of the suburbs of London —Putney—named Mrs. Norris.' 'Heavens,' said I, 'how false the accusation must be.' To this he made no reply, but requested to be shown to her room at once. Begging him to keep his mission as secret as he could, for the sake of the family, I conducted him upstairs. He remained outside the door, on the landing, whilst I went in to examine and prepare my patient. Whether she had some suspicion, when her mother told her I

had gone down to see this stranger, I cannot say; but she must have taken more chloral, as I found her in a deadly swoon. Mrs. Abbott was endeavouring to revive her, but of course fruitlessly. The thought flashed across my mind, 'Let Mr. Bowden see her at once, and tell him she is dead.' Requesting her mother to go into the dressing-room for a few minutes, I opened the door and said—'You can come in and see her; she is dead.' He entered softly, and going up to the bedside, looked a moment or two, then compared the likeness with the photograph. Appearing quite satisfied, he said he would at once return to London, if I would give him the certificate. This I did, and he left the house. As soon as he was gone, I used every possible means to restore her to animation; and after some time my efforts were rewarded. I then explained to her mother exactly how we were situated, and that I really gave the certificate, believing, and almost hoping she might be dead, but that under the circumstances we must keep up the idea, and get her away into hiding as soon as possible, if she would confess to us the charge was true. When she was sufficiently recovered we explained matters to her."

Here he went to a locked cabinet, and took out a carefully-written manuscript, which he handed to me. "Read this, and then you will more fully understand the case."

I took it, and, opening the first page, read as follows :—

CONFESSION OF M. W.

"My brief married life had always been more or less unhappy, and the chief reason for this was greatly dependant on the fact of my husband having a mystery. He was very particular that I never by any chance should open a letter addressed to him, and many that he received were mysteriously uncommented upon and consigned to the flames. Although there might have been nothing in this, still it aroused the suspicions of a young married woman. I had no secrets from him, and I felt it a great grievance he should be so mysterious with me. I often felt annoyed at the open admiration he showed for Ethel Wilkins, who was a very frequent visitor at the house ; but I was too proud to expostulate with him, or to show how deeply I was wounded, and brooded over my supposed wrongs in sullen silence. At last we became thoroughly estranged from each other, and I wretchedly unhappy. One day my husband told me it was necessary he should go to London for a week or so on business connected with a farm on the estate, and as his time would be much taken up with lawyers, it would be very dull for me, so that it would be better to remain at home. I saw he did not wish I should accompany him, and pressed the matter no further. Placing myself in communication with a London detective, I requested to be made acquainted with the real object of these now frequent visits to London. One afternoon, as some visitors were calling who had recently returned from town, they mentioned in the course of conversation they had seen my husband two or three times in the Row with Mrs. and Miss Wilkins. I assumed as much indifference to the intelligence as I possibly could, and allowed them to drift on to other topics apparently unconcerned. No

sooner were they gone than I rushed to my room, and, locking myself in, gave way to mad rage, engendered solely from jealousy. This was what he had gone to London without me for, to flirt with Ethel Wilkins! No wonder I was not wanted! As I was still crying, and feeling undecided what to do, my maid brought up the letters which had just come by the afternoon's post. One was from the person I had employed in the private enquiry office, stating that a proof of the reason of Sir Charles Wynton's frequent absence on visits to London had been found, and if I would come up by return all particulars could be given. I was just in the frame of mind to respond to such a proposal, and to act in so ill-advised a manner. Accordingly, ordering the carriage to take me to Oakford for the next London train, I started alone, and with very little luggage, much to the surprise of my maid, who, however, thought I was going to join my husband, and should return with him the next day, or send for her to come up with my luggage. Arrived in London I was driven to a small quiet hotel near the Strand, that I had occasionally heard of amongst my friends. Here I was quite unknown, and I gave my name as Mrs. Wynton. Before retiring for the night, I wrote a note to Mr. Watts, the man I had employed to make enquiries, telling him I was in London, giving my address, and asking him to call upon me next morning. As I was sitting over my breakfast the waiter brought in his card, and I requested he should be shown up. He was rather shabby, and, certainly, not too clean, smelt very much of tobacco smoke, and there was a sort of insolent familiarity about his manner from which I instinctively recoiled. However, I had placed myself in that unpleasant position, and must take the consequences. He then requested me, as the result of his investigations, to go down to Putney that evening, and find my way from the station to a small villa called 'The Nook.' It stood

away from the road, and was down a lonely lane, which terminated in a *cul de sac*. The house was well screened from the road by a belt of laurel shrubs, which grew to some height. He advised me to creep gently on to the small lawn, and there I could be quite secure from observation, under the deep shade of a large cedar. The family were in the habit of sitting with the lamp lighted, and the venetians not drawn down, during these fine summer evenings. Taking down his instructions, and paying his demand in full, he left me, whilst I waited with impatience for the time to arrive when I should go. It was a fine balmy summer's evening, and very hot, and I had little difficulty in finding the cottage. On arrival it was quite dark, and the stars beginning to peep out one by one. There was no moon. Following Mr. Watts's directions, I crept through the gate, along the front walk, then on to the lawn, which was at the side of the villa, and there screened myself under the shadow of the spreading cedar he had spoken of, and which was close to the dining-room window. The lamps were lighted, and covered with rose-coloured silk shades, which diffused a lovely light all through the room. The venetians were not drawn, and the window stood open. The room was small, but comfortably furnished. A cold supper was on the table, with champagne and very pretty cut flowers. At one end sat a beautiful woman, not more than seven or eight-and-twenty. She was simply dressed in a high white dress, and her hair, which was fair and curly, was beautifully arranged. Two sweet little children between the ages of six and seven were playing about the room, and running up to their mother for dainty morsels. At the other end of the table sat my husband! He was dangling another child on his knee, and giving it sips of champagne. An interesting family party; and, pray, who were they? My first idea was to dash wildly in amongst

them, and denounce him ; but the sight seemed to have its fascination for me, and I stood rooted to the spot. I could not hear at all distinctly what was said, but the shrill voices of the pretty little children seemed to call my husband 'Guardie.' No servant appeared to be in attendance. The cottage was so small possibly one only would be required, and she would be engaged in the kitchen. After a lapse of some time he rose, and, looking at his watch, seemed to me to be going. The beautiful woman got up also, and they stood talking very earnestly in a low tone for some moments, he with his hand on her shoulder. Then kissing the children, and giving them a jump in the air, he approached her, took an equally affectionate farewell, then hurriedly left the house. I listened to the sound of his retreating footsteps down the road. The lady sat down, and seemed to be giving vent to tears. The children quarrelled, unobserved and unreproved, over the possession of some fruit. My blood boiled, surged ; flashes of light danced before my eyes ; one idea entered my mind to the exclusion of all reason. Hastily entering the room through the long open window, I seized the carving knife from the table, and plunged it into her throat. Never sha I forget the horrible scream she gave as she fell senseless on the floor. The children ceased their quarrelling and stood staring at me, as if petrified. Without a moment's delay I ran through the open window, out of the garden, and as soon as I reached the main road hailed a cab, and told the man to drive me to Charing Cross. What had my mad passion led me to do ? After all, might not Mrs. Norris be some poor relation of my husband, although I had never heard of the name ? I knew and remembered there was a far off taint of insanity in my family, and felt sure that during those few moments I committed the act I was mad. Perhaps after all I had not killed her, and she would recover. No one saw me but the children, and they

would be too young to be distinct in their description of me. It would never be known who had done it. Arrived at Charing Cross, I paid the fare, dismissed the cab, and walked with trembling steps to my hotel, going straight up to my room. On examining my dress, it had a few blood stains, but these I quickly removed. I could not go to bed, but sat up all night, starting at every sound. In the morning I went down to breakfast, still buoying myself up with the hope I had not done very much harm, and that medical assistance would have put all straight. Whilst the waiter was placing my tea on the table, I ventured to take up the morning paper, and saw as follows: 'Awful murder. A murder of a fearful description took place last evening at a villa in Putney called The Nook. A lady of the name of Norris, with three children lived there. It appears it was her habit to sit with the window open, after the lamp was lighted, and as it opened on to the ground, an entrance to the room was easily effected, and this circumstance favoured the design of some wicked and malicious person, who had a motive for the murder. The eldest of the three children, who were in the room when the deed was done, declares it was a lady, who came in, and taking up a knife from the supper table, stabbed her mother in the neck. The knife severed the carotid artery, and death was instantaneous. A great crowd has assembled round the house; the police have got a very good clue, and we trust the wretched assassin will be quickly brought to justice.' After reading this, everything swam before my eyes, and I feared I should fall. Mustering up all the self-command I possibly could, I forced myself to take some breakfast in an unconcerned manner, then telling the waiter I should return to the country, and asking for my bill, I left London, and came back to Burnham, where you know as soon as I arrived I took a dose of choral, hoping to terminate my unhappy existence."

Dr. Leslie had watched me with great attention during my perusal of this manuscript; and on my returning it to him, locked it carefully in the cabinet again. "Had I any idea," he commenced by saying, "that half-an-hour after my remedies—strong coffee, injection of ether into the veins, and galvanism over the region of the heart—a detective would have come to Burnham, with a warrant to apprehend my patient on the charge of murder, I should possibly not have taken such energetic measures to restore animation. The detective having left Burnham with the certificate of death, signed by me, it was absolutely necessary to go on with the deception. For some time I did not think she would eventually rally; but, about half-an-hour after he had left, she seemed rapidly to get better. Mrs. Abbott and I talked matters over and decided on the course of action we must take. Accordingly, we ordered the house to be closed, told the servants all was over, and I sent a mounted messenger to the undertaker at Oakford, with measurements, and instructions that a shell should be sent home as soon as possible. I also sent a note to my assistant, stating, that owing to Sir Charles Wynton's absence, I should be detained at Burnham, in order to help the family; and requesting him to take any cases for me. Lady Wynton's dressing-room had two doors, one opening on the landing, the other into the bedroom, which made matters more easy, as food could be carried up,

and things taken away without any one being able to see into the inner room. That evening the shell was brought home, with all its ghastly paraphernalia. Her mother told the men that no one would be allowed to place her in the coffin but herself, aided by me; so they went downstairs, and remained there until I summoned them to fasten the lid—giving them to understand there was a necessity for its being done at once. It is needless to enter into the arrangements which Mrs. Abbott and I made, in order to deceive them, as to the occupant of the shell; and the lid was firmly fastened down, without their evincing any curiosity. The next matter that remained to be settled was where Lady Wynton should be secreted until I could make arrangements for her removal to an absolutely safe hiding place. I remembered the existence of a secret floor at the top of Woodlands. It had originally been constructed in the time of the Civil Wars, for the hiding of political prisoners, but in modern days had been furnished for the reception of one or two bachelors during the shooting season, when Burnham was full to overflowing. It would be necessary to take Sylvester into our confidence. I could not have entertained such an idea for one moment had it not been that she was already very much in my power from some trouble she had got into in a case of poisoning, years since, when my evidence might have hanged her; and I felt certain she would do what was necessary, and what I desired

without asking questions. Therefore I went over to Woodlands, and requested to see Sylvester alone, and made known to her as much of the secret as was necessary to account for the top floor being needed, without in any way incriminating myself. Then returning to Burnham, I made final arrangements, and at twelve o'clock that night Lady Wynton and I left Burnham, by the glass door of the billiard-room, whilst Mrs. Abbott returned to her own bedroom, and left the rooms to be put in order by the servants. Lady Wynton was covered with a large black alpaca cloak and hood, and we slipped quietly into Woodlands when all the household were asleep except Sylvester, who was waiting up. A fire was lighted in the top room, and refreshments laid on a small table—everything in readiness and even comfort. It was arranged that Sylvester should bring up the necessary food, and fuel for each day at night, and keep the fugitive's secret closely. Meanwhile preparations went on for the funeral on a grand scale, Sir Charles Wynton having returned. He had been on the Continent for a few days, and in this way missed the telegrams. I went up to see him, and told him of the visit of the detective *prior to the death*. I found he knew of the murder. Suspicion might have fallen heavily on him, but no one had seen him enter or leave The Nook. That evening the servant was out, and the children said it was a lady, the same that their 'guardie' had in a locket

on his watch chain. The servant at The Nook gave the name of Sir Charles's valet, who frequently came over with parcels and presents for the children. The police got at this man. The likeness on the watch chain was proved to be Lady Wynton. A photograph was obtained, and the warrant taken out."

"Who was Mrs. Norris?"

"A vain, flirting, foolish little thing, whose husband was in India. I imagine Sir Charles had something to do with the arrangement of her property; but time presses," he added, looking at his watch, "I must finish my story."

"As soon as it was possible, I made arrangements for Lady Wynton to be moved to Witton, under the charge of a trustworthy attendant. She took the name of Mrs. Smith, to protect her from espionage or idle curiosity as much as possible; but after being there two years her mind began to fail from the pressure of circumstances. She became troublesome, and even violent at times. From enquiries I made, I feared some detectives were watching the place, so removed her to Woodlands for a short time. Unfortunately, just as I had done so, you came to stay there. She was allowed to walk about in the garden and house at night, and we always let her wear a dress, resembling a shroud made in white flannel, so that should any one by mischance see her they would imagine it was a ghost."

"I saw her!" I exclaimed, with breathless interest.

"Exactly so; she got into your bedroom one night, partly from the carelessness of Sylvester. She also appeared in your aunt's room, and some of the servants had, I think, seen her, and imagined, of course, it was her ghost. The one monomania she had was that her husband should be told. 'Remember, tell him!' was what she would constantly keep repeating."

"Was this the secret she told Aunt Mary when she was supposed to be dying?" I asked.

"The secret? Of course it was, concerning the murder of Mrs. Norris, but your aunt, believing her dead, and not wishing to render Sir Charles miserable, never told him."

"Yet he knew it," I observed.

"Yes, but she was not aware of the fact."

"And the music at night?" I enquired. "Was it Lady Wynton who played?"

"No; it was your aunt. Unfortunately, having seen what she supposed to be Lady Wynton's ghost once or twice in the house at night, she became restless and nervous, and used to rise in her sleep, and, going down into the drawing-room, played the piano sometimes for one or two hours. She has always been a confirmed somnambulist, and I had a great objection to her being suddenly roused from her cataleptic state, as it might have proved fatal, with her weak heart. She was, of

course, quite unaware she did this: but, as she was always watched by Sylvester, there was no fear of her coming to any harm. You were not told, as we thought it might make you nervous and apprehensive. After you had been a short time at Woodlands, Mrs. Abbott and I made definite arrangements, and Lady Wynton was removed to the south of France to a *maison de santé*."

"Then she lives?" I said, my pulses thrilling with excitement.

"Assuredly she does," was his reply. "Far away in a distant part of France, in a *maison de santé*, is a 'Mrs. Smith,' hopelessly insane. Her bills are paid by her mother, regularly through a London solicitor, and no questions are likely to be asked. Her ravings about the murder are simply looked upon as empty hallucinations, and the vagaries of a disordered brain."

"Then everyone believes her dead?"

"Every one, except her mother, myself, and now the secret is yours. Sylvester imagines she died when she went to France."

"Oh! Dr. Leslie, what an escape I have had. Supposing I had disregarded those words in your letter whilst I was staying at Workington?"

"My child, you would have been a wife and no wife, and your children nameless. But I determined to save you from this, however dangerous and fraught with evil to myself, and I trust the sacrifice I have made will not be abused."

"Oh! never, never, will I breathe a syllable," said I, bursting into tears, and relieving my overwrought feelings. "But supposing Sir Charles marries anyone else, they will be equally sacrificed?"

"They would, in order to save me from penal servitude, perhaps for life. But I do not think it is likely. He will be piqued at your refusal, and wage war against your sex; besides, Lady Wynton may not live so very long; her constitution is being rapidly shattered from the inroads of mental disease."

"And now," he continued, rising, "I must go out to see a dying patient, a fit sequel to this confession, and do you go to bed, and forget your trouble in sleep. I hope you will return home as soon as you can. Do not remain in the neighbourhood, and risk being brought into his company." He gave me his hand; I took it, but could not speak, but if the pressure I gave it could have assured him of absolute fealty to him, he must have been re-assured.

The mystery at Woodlands was at last solved, entangled in a net of horror and crime. Could I ever forget it, or the past experiences of six months?

In a few days, when arrangements had been made, I returned to Manchester. Mother gladly welcomed me. My brothers were delighted at my return, and our maid Lucy thought "I 'ad

grow'd and much improved." Mother once told me, in the gloaming, that she felt disappointed I had thrown such a brilliant future away, as that contained in "my first offer." But I made only this reply: "Mother, I shall never marry."

I wrote to Mr. Peel and refused his offer, giving as the cause the same reason.

He never wrote to me again, nor have I ever heard of him since.

Ethel Wilkins married an elderly colonel and went to India. Sir Charles Wynton let Burnham Park and went abroad for some years. Aunt Mary decided on moving, and making her residence in London: and I remained at home with my mother, leading the ordinary sort of life that young ladies do with small incomes. I moved in society, limited on account of its intense cliquism; its petty jealousies, envyings, and heartburnings, affected me not, for this reason I felt that the horror of the secret I possessed, and the trouble I had gone through, had destroyed some of the brightest springs of life.

My part in the world's stage is over, and as I am no longer an actor, let me drop the curtain.

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